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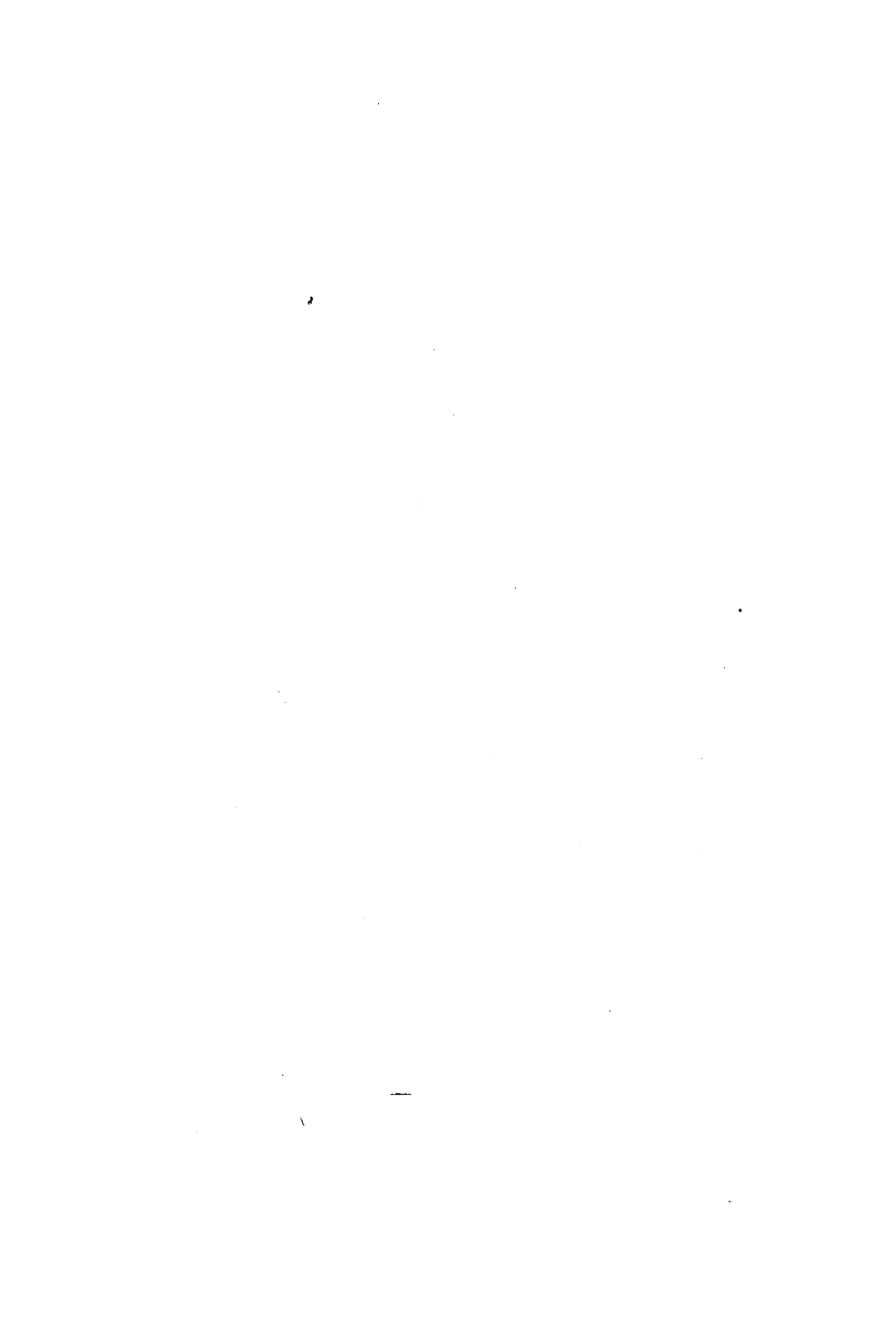














THE  
COST OF A SECRET.







THE  
COST OF A SECRET.

BY THE  
AUTHOR OF "AGNES TREMORNE."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

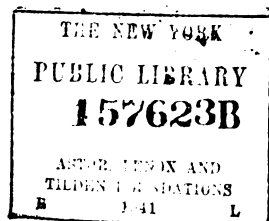
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# THE COST OF A SECRET.

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## BOOK III.—(*Continued.*)

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### CHAPTER IV.

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“ I HAVE taken your advice, dear friend, and have left Milan, and have settled myself for three or four months at a quiet little villa in the neighbourhood of Siena. I chose this place for one reason which is of paramount importance to me. No English are here. For some reason they flock from Florence, and Rome, and Naples to all sorts of places in Tuscany, but entirely overlook Siena. I have no Anglophobia, but it would be painful for me to meet any one I had known in former days, or to make new acquaintances.

“ I hired a piano, and brought with me the woman who attended upon me at Milan. I am sufficiently near Siena for housekeeping cares to be attended to between this maid and a *contadino*



lad I have hired ; and I am anticipating a period of entire rest.

“Do you know Siena ? Its cathedral, campanile, wonderful and exquisite pictures, of course ; but even *you*, I think, have never looked at it but in the course of a journey to or from Rome, and then it is never done justice to.

“The north and south meet here. On one side are undulating heights, crowned with trees ; long blackberry hedges ; ravines, covered on all their slopes with chestnuts and elms ; on the other, the soft plain stretching, *campagna* fashion, to Ammiati and Radicofani. From my window—my house is on a hill nearly opposite, and somewhat lower than that on which Siena is built—I look directly at the cathedral, as it stands against the sky ; the light is so brilliant that I can see the lapis lazuli on the arch above the entrance, blue as if a piece of the sky itself had been let in. The town stands on the edge of this hill, which then abruptly slopes down in clayey terraces to the tree-covered dell and road beneath ; it makes a dark foreground, as it were, and beyond it, but close against it, with as many effects of light and shade on its peaceful breast as on a calm sea, is the Maremma, stretching out to the feet of Radicofani. Here and there, with a small belt of cypresses round them, are tiny villas,—some mere farmhouses, some with battlemented walls





of mimic proportions,—but all bathed in the light which seems never to leave that lovely plain.

“In the usual Italian fashion, the corn and the vines and the olive-trees are all planted together, and grow up to the walls of the house. There is something in this which gives me such a luxurious feeling of the plenteousness of the land, that, though I fear not the best way to carry on lucrative agriculture, I like it. Close up against this house, forming part of it indeed, is the cottage of the *contadini*. Three stalwart men, a vague number of children, and an old and young woman are my companions in this solitude. They are all very busy and very contented. I believe the preponderance of males in this family is a great cause of joy. On this account, paradoxically I suppose, they make much of a little girl, five years old, with brown naked legs, that I see marching about in every direction, attended by a ~~train~~ of urchins, the pet and darling of them all, for she is the only *citina*. Dogs, cats, and two majestic, enormous white oxen make up the family. When these two huge beasts are conducted to their different avocations by two little boys of seven and nine years old, except the little boy that I used to see when I was a young girl at home, perched on the back of one of the enormous plough horses, with hands tight locked in its mane, I have never seen such a disproportion-



tion in body, between the human being and the quadruped it had in charge. There is a long, beautiful lane which extends from this house to a road towards Porta Camolia, but there is another shorter cut, down from almost the door of the house, which passes by Fontebranda to another gate of the city. The beautiful Dantesque names one meets in Siena, delight me as much as anything. This lane winds and serpentine in the most charming manner, sometimes covered by trees, sometimes open on one side, and through the opening, in certain lights, the still, smokeless town and dominant cathedral look like the unreal towers and temples of some Fata Morgana. At others I can hear the singing from the church quite plainly, but always on the slope down from my hill (the one on which my villa is built) and on the rising upwards to the other (on which stands Siena), are the peculiar sounds belonging to country life,—contadini singing, carts creaking, cattle lowing. Sometimes as I walk along, a whole troop of goats, with their long fantastic leaps and sidelong motions, come slowly down, cropping the green on the hedges; as they do so, the scent of thyme fills the air. The herb-age is of the most racy and scented kind; you cannot put down your hand to pluck a wild flower, but besides the faint odours of the pale blossom, is some twig or spray which has a fresh,



vivifying, if not sweet smell. The other day as I was sitting down under a huge chestnut tree, which is the patriarchal lord among these trees, full of sad and perhaps wrong thoughts, I heard the faint murmur of a song, and a touch as of a warm mouth on my shoulder; I looked, and close beside me, but on the other side of the hedge, was one of those huge soft-eyed oxen, eating the green leaves from the shrubs which divided me from the field below. He looked at me with mild indifference as I rose. A little further on was another, and at some little distance, with the rope which was fastened to each slipped through her girdle, a slim maiden of about twenty was walking, knitting, and singing to herself. It was the prettiest sight in the world. They obeyed her as she drew them a little back with a docility which was marvellous to an uninitiated person. Her smile and salutation to me were as graceful and courteous as the most poetical shepherdess one dreams of in the days of old. It was Arcady itself. Had I been a painter I should have sketched her on the spot. Such a slender creature ruling such strong ones, and walking on her way singing as if nothing could hurt her or harm her, or resist the force of her gentleness, was a lovely and touching sight. The especial beauty of this undulating ground is that it is a continual surprise. I walk about and



sometimes see a panorama all round me ; at other times there is a little table of earth and no beyond. The trees and the steep bank shut all else out. The wild flowers are very beautiful, and to me, who am no botanist, seem very rare, but that may be my ignorance. The virgin's-bower is in abundance in great snowy sheets, which divide as one gets near, into the lovely and delicate leaf which gives that flower such elegance. You who have made all these your study, would be pleased with all the vegetable and animal life around. Such prodigality of beauty ! such colours ! such odours ! but now and then in the midst of all this peace and loveliness, some little of what my father would call the devil's writing. I looked at a beautiful butterfly poised as I thought in a strange motionlessness on a tall bulrush : it had great wings, pencilled in a peculiar way so that it looked double. I watched it for so long without the faintest motion being perceptible that at last I went nearer to examine it. On it I saw a hideous spider—a white spider with those frightful marks that make it look like a death's head : it had stationed itself on the head of the butterfly, and whether it were weaving its shroud of a web around it, or was content with slowly suffocating it, I cannot tell, but the butterfly was dead. Those wide-spread, beautiful wings would never move again.



“Do you know, dear friend, that this gave me a shuddering feeling which reminded me of what marriage is. Do not be angry with me; I do not say my marriage, but how many women are crushed into immobility by marriage. They look just as ever; their poor painted beauty is as gaudy to the eye, but the life is gone. An individuality stronger than their own has destroyed it. All the freedom which bore them on the wing from flower to flower is lost. They are nailed to one changeless doom for ever. It looks like life, but it has long been death.

“I keep my eyes open to all the beauty I see, and my ears listen eagerly to the melodies which are so rich and numerous in an Italian summer. You would smile to see me leaning against the persiani, and setting a simple melody to the monotonous whirr of the cicada, or trying to analyse the songs and choruses which the contadini sing. With little melody there is perfect harmony, and the swelling, prolonged chaunt at the end gives the whole a most peculiar character.

“You will say this letter is never-ending. Besides these rural sights and sounds which interest and delight me more than I can describe, I came on a little piece of the mediæval picturesque which would have delighted an artist or an author. As I was walking up from my villa to one



called Poggio al Vento (somewhat raised on the right hand from the lane I have described), I paused for a moment to look back at the light and shade of the path I traversed, and I saw coming towards me a nun in full costume, though over her veil and guimpe she wore a broad black straw hat. She was a quiet, simple-looking young woman, tall and slender, with an oval face, outlined rigidly by the white linen folded round it. Delicate black eyebrows and a mouth like a pale blush rose. Her brown serge dress fell in heavy straight folds over her bare sandalled feet. Behind her was an ass laden with two large sacks, pannier-wise, and a stout contadino lad, armed with a stick, was urging it on.

“She was going to the different farm-houses to get their contributions of flour and beans and pease for the convent to which she belonged. She had soft, grey, dreamy eyes, and a pure, composed face that harmonised with the scene. *En plein dixneuvième siècle*, it did seem strange; but there was an air of simplicity about her which took off from the incongruity of the idea. She evidently had a profound faith in her own work. I was told, by the bye, she was rather a sharp hand at a bargain, lifted the weights rather suspiciously, and looked at the quality of the pease. But she gave the little brown girl a pretty coloured picture, and kissed her many times: so



the peculiar feminine element had not been entirely crushed out. She looked at me without turning her head, but with that watchful looking out of the corners of her eyes, which I have always noticed in friars and nuns, because I suppose the exercise of sight, hearing, and speech, is with them always under rule and discipline.

"Sometimes I go to Siena and wander for hours in the churches and galleries.

"Do you remember that fresco of Razzi's, 'Christ Raising the Dead?' it has struck me more than I can describe. What a great master! As great as Rafael in many of Rafael's best gifts, and greater, I think, in a certain natural pathos, which affects me most powerfully. There are two hands uplifted from a grave in that fresco which are a passionate poem in themselves. How one's heart echoes that entreaty for deliverance, for redemption, for life. Oh, there are times when I could so pray! Would that I had the faith to think God was as near to hear me. The loneliness of my fate sometimes frightens me, as the dark frightens a child. What matters it to the child that a few paces off there is light and there are people; in the room he is in it is dark and he is alone.

"All this is weak and irrational. But are we not all (I know I am) weak and irrational at times? A collapse invariably takes place after tension.



The only thing is to limit the feeling, and not let it interfere with action. Health, work, and the certainty that to a certain degree the work tends to success, are the happiest conditions for a human being to be in ; but there is still a large margin unoccupied. There is a yearning in my heart, which swells to desperation sometimes ; and I can only wring my hands and cry, and think that if I could only clasp one fond affectionate hand in mine all the rest of life might go, and I would be content to die. Gerard ! Gerard !

“ But you must not think this is often ; and indeed I think I may say the paroxysms are briefer in duration and at longer intervals than at first. To none but you would I confess them. Forgive me and bear with me. Your letters are my only comfort, and even when you scold me they give me pleasure. It is sweet to be scolded by one who loves while he scolds. It is only the bitter and aggressive reproof which comes from an alienated heart, that rouses all the antagonism of my nature and makes me resentful and relentless. But a loving hand can guide me with a thread.

“ In the autumn I go to Florence. My engagement is for the Pergola. It is more lucrative than I hoped. In three years I shall be able to pay the debt Gerard owes my father. I am told that



in the spring and autumn I shall meet with engagements at Milan and Venice, and that next year the terms will be doubled.

“What an egotistical letter I have written ; but with you to be egotistical is to be sympathetic, for it is to shew that one understands how you share in the joys and griefs of all you honour with your affection. God bless you, my dearest, kindest friend.”



## CHAPTER V.



IT was quite true, as Cordelia said to M.

Corsand, her moments of depression were becoming rarer and rarer. No one works with a firm purpose who does not sooner or later reap the reward of all continued effort, *i.e.*, growth and strength. But it is also useless to deny that the course of a frail human being, in any particular path, cannot be one continued triumph. It is a march *towards* victory; but victory is far, far off; and there are discouragements and obstacles in the path. The feet slip, the hands tremble, the whole human being sinks down. There is only one Hand which we can always hold, by which to raise ourselves and to live on.

Perhaps, in a profession like Cordelia's, the nerves are tried more than in any other. The study of all art deepens and refines the sensibilities; and in the double action which it imposes, the perception of all external objects as they are, and as they are reflected on the imagination, is a great trial of itself. Such persons beyond all others require not to be left to solitude



too long. A healthy influx of human sympathies and cares would be the best anodyne for them.

It is usual in fictions to represent virtue as continually hymning *Io Pæans*, whatever may be the trials which surround it. Every kind of misery is heaped on one victim, who in serene and sublime strength is superior to all. But it is not the case in real life. The best are so faulty that there are doors for ever open, through which can enter the enemies of peace; doubt, revolt, regret. Cordelia suffered deeply. It was good in the end, but the discipline was felt *as* discipline.

In her art she improved considerably. She watched the untutored but expressive gestures of the people among whom she dwelt, and observed how faithfully they pourtrayed the feelings they designed to express.\* When I say faithfully, I mean faithfully as regards the vehemence with which these people allow themselves to be ruffled by trifles.

When the old gray-headed woman, who had the charge of the poultry, threw her arms above her head, and stamping her feet, declared, "*Non è cosa peggiore sulla terra, che una gallina forestiera,*" the tragic attitude, though it was an exaggeration when applied to the straying of an alien fowl, was a fine model for the expression of impotent rage.

. . .



Another woman, who was pouring out her wrongs (she was maddened by jealousy) to Cordelia, seized a bunch of wild roses which grew up the wall near which she stood, and said, "He gathered me like this when I was young and full of hopes, as this bough is of buds; and then, after his *capriccio* had been satisfied, scattered all my hopes, all my love, all my heart, like this," and she tore the flowers to pieces. "Poor flowers!" she added with a repentant tone when she saw them on the ground; and then, more fiercely, "but *he* will never say poor Maria."

All this was observed and hoarded up by Cordelia. Her great quickness of perception was of infinite service to her. As the time passed her letters to M. Corsand were more cheerful, and more on subjects out of herself.

One circumstance, however, troubled her. After she had been two months at Siena she received a packet containing the bracelet she had parted with in November, at Milan. There was not a line of letter enclosed with it. But there was a memorandum scribbled carelessly inside the box,—"*Paid eight Napoleons to reclaim a bracelet.*" The man who had purchased the bracelet had taken down her address; and she had left with the landlord of the house where she had lodged a request in writing, that any letters that arrived for her should be forwarded



Poste Restante, Siena. But the only person she expected letters from was M. Corsand. The only person who knew she was in Milan was this kind friend. She had never told him that she had parted with the bracelet. She could not, therefore, attribute the kindness, if meant as a kindness, to him. But, if not his, whose? It gave her many hours' thought and perplexity to conjecture who had discovered her. On looking at it curiously, coming again as it did so unexpectedly into her possession, she observed that an additional date had been finely scratched on it—not engraved, but scratched as with a fine instrument. It was the date of the downfall of her happiness. But who knew of that date but one person? and she was not only far away, but had no means of knowing where Cordelia herself was.

By the end of October she had established herself in a small apartment in the Via della Pergola.

The time for rehearsals had commenced. She attended them constantly. The fear she had of meeting acquaintances and friends was such that, except a long morning walk in the Cascine, or out of the Porta Romana to Bellosguardo, she never left her house.

During the evenings while she sate in her solitary room, she usually occupied herself



in writing to M. Corsand. These letters were written at intervals, but formed quite a journal. As we are privileged to look over her shoulder, we will give an extract from another of these letters.

“ Since I have been in Florence I have studied incessantly every morning at home, and four times a week I go to the theatre to attend the rehearsal. I have lessons from the celebrated Signor R—— twice a week.

“ If undertaken conscientiously, the career I have chosen is certainly a very arduous one. I smile when I think of all the mistaken notions which are common about it. I once heard a man say he should have a poor opinion of any woman who personated well either Lucrezia Borgia or Phédre. I was pert enough at the time to ask him what was the amount of bad acting which was equivalent to virtue? How do such persons consider the authors of the works in which such characters are portrayed? Is it genius to conceive a character like Lady Macbeth's, or describe one like Cleopatra's, and is it a sin to represent it?

“ Wherever a woman's personal vanity is fed, and where the glorification of self is alone cared for, then all things aid the task of corruption; but it is essentially the privilege of true art to emancipate from self. Where it does not do so,



it may be *savoir faire*, it may be talent, but it is not art.

“I am struck with these things when I go to the theatre and see the difference between my different comrades. With some it is simply a means of earning bread, and they go through their duties with a stolid indifference to everything but their wages; others again have but one idea, that of displaying themselves in picturesque costume; there are only one or two who possess something of aspiration and of devotion to an ideal.

“The only true musical artist I have seen since I have been here is a girl who is engaged at the Pagliano theatre. Her voice is a rich contralto, and I became acquainted with her through Signor R——. He also gives her lessons, and when I was practising some of the duets with Arsace in *Semiramide*, he asked me to allow her to come down and sing the Arsace part. He said it would be good for both. She came down, was introduced to me as Madlle. Liesa, and I certainly have never heard a more beautiful voice.

“Who she is, I do not know; I have never heard her called by any other name, but she is Russian by birth.

“A Calmuck face, with low brow, turned up nose, flat face, and yet with a certain kind of



beauty—not of complexion—for she is sallow, not of eyes—hers are pale-blue, and wide apart, and small; but the mouth, though large, is flexible, well-shaped, and rosy; and the teeth have that dewy look which one sees in a young hound. The whole of her face is bright with their gleam when she laughs.

“ She is the strangest and most untutored creature in manner, appearance, and gestures, but naturally clever, and with a desire for improvement in her art, which is to me most interesting. She lives in one room, which she sweeps and cleans herself; her dinner is sent her from a neighbouring *trattoria*, and she studies and practises the whole day. Her only amusement is reading French novels, which she devours; and when I once remonstrated with her about it, she told me, with the greatest simplicity, that she was studying passion in them. ‘I have no imagination,’ she said, ‘or insight; I know nothing of these things, I must seek for them where I can, for I must learn how to feel before I can act.’

“ I could not help smiling.

“ I have been of a little use to her in various ways. She comes down to consult me about a difficult passage in her music, or to explain some dilemma in the part which she has had given her, and I have brought her home at night from the theatre sometimes, instead of her being hustled



about in those narrow passages amidst all that crowd entirely alone, and her gratitude and affection are quite disproportionate for such slight services; but I am sure she is of a most affectionate nature. Her health is very delicate, from her total carelessness of the commonest precautions as to food, clothing, fire.

"So far had I written when, imagine my surprise and my pain, I was sitting yesterday morning writing in my room, when a knock at the door announced Liesa. She came in, laughing heartily, with a pair of page's trousers slung over her shoulder.

"'Dear madame, just see—I am to sing 'Il Segreto,' in Lucrezia, and wear these. I have tried them on, but oh! my legs are not fit. I can sing, but the dress is *too* difficult.'

"She ran over the air with her rich, melting voice, and not being quite sure of a *roulade* she was improvising, she went to the piano, opened it, and, after a few preliminary runs, went over the air, and sang it, as she always sings everything, with the purest intonation, and in a voice full of sweetness.

"She is nothing but a voice. She never thinks of her personal appearance, or even of the part she has to act; only utters the music to the best of her ability.

"I stood up to suggest one or two alterations,



and we were both so occupied I did not hear another knock, and the opening of the door. When I turned round, to my astonishment there stood at the door a servant, a *chasseur* in full livery—a most imposing presence in my little room.

“ He bowed, and addressed Liesa.

“ ‘ The Princess was up-stairs, would mademoiselle go to her.’

“ Liesa jumped up, her face changed at once.

“ She looked troubled and almost afraid.

“ ‘ Thank you very much for your kindness,’ she said to me; ‘ will you excuse me for a moment.’ She ran out, and the man followed her.

“ At that moment I caught sight of the objectionable page’s dress, and thinking to overtake her, was just calling her to take it up with her, when I heard a voice, which I recognised immediately.

“ The person who spoke, was coming down, and met Liesa on the landing-place of the next flight of stairs above mine.

“ ‘ Have you changed your room, Liesa ?’

“ ‘ No ; I went to see a friend.’

“ ‘ A friend ?’

“ ‘ Yes.’

“ ‘ I thought my orders were strict that you



should make no acquaintances. Who is she?—a comrade?’

“ ‘ Oh, no !’

“ ‘ Who then ?’

“ A pause—‘ A lady.’

“ ‘ A lady ?’

“ ‘ A singer,’ jerked in poor Liesa.

“ ‘ Oh !’

“ There was relief in her tone. ‘ Where does she sing ?’

“ ‘ At the Pergola, not before the Carnival.’

“ ‘ Very good.’ I heard no more, as she sank her voice, and began whispering. They had been speaking in German. Every inflection of that soft penetrating voice I recalled. Could I ever forget it? Had it not uttered the syllables that had blighted my happiness, and its accents still vibrated in my heart?

“ After a few moments she came down and went down-stairs. I flew to the window. Her carriage was waiting a few doors below my house. As she got in, she looked round, and I saw her once again.

“ When Liesa returned, which she did almost immediately, she looked serious and, for her, gloomy.

“ ‘ Is that lady a friend of yours ?’

“ ‘ Well,—friend! No.—Yes! I suppose I must call her friend or patroness. She pays for



my music lessons. Signor R— tells me she is always inquiring about my progress, and takes the deepest interest in it. She has always paid for my education.'

" ' Does he know her ? ' "

" ' He goes to arrange her concerts. She gives concerts,—balls,—*déjeuners*,— everything,— and knows everybody. She pays for my lodgings too, and comes to see me occasionally. ' "

" ' When did you see her first ? ' "

" ' The first time I distinctly remember her was when I was about eight years old. I was sent from Moscow to Cracow, where she was ; but I had a dim recollection of having seen her before that time. Since then I have only seen her since I came to Florence. She sent for me from Cracow. ' "

" ' Do you like her ? ' "

" ' That day when I tell you I arrived at Cracow, and saw her, she looked at me for a moment with eyes that I could have loved ; but since, she is cold and rather severe. She sent me to school, and, hearing I had a good voice, sent me afterwards here to study for the stage. ' "

" ' Why does she claim the charge of you ? ' "

" ' She knew my parents, she says. ' "

" ' In Italy ? ' "

" ' No ; in Russia. ' "



"I said nothing more. I looked at Liesa more attentively than ever, but in her plain face and ordinary person there was no resemblance to the delicate features and elegant figure which I remembered so well.

"After a little arrangement of the offending garments, and a little advice as to the part she was to act, Leisa left me.

"This has been a shock to me. I felt my tongue cleave to my mouth as I saw—as I heard that woman. To be again in the same city with her! Some of the hope with which I was entering on my new life is withered. Shall I leave this house and go to another? The thought has occurred to me once or twice, and yet it seems to me that my chance of meeting her in the streets is not altered. In my own rooms I shall never see her, and I rarely, if ever, go to Liesa's; when I do I will take my precautions. I am of use to Liesa here, and it is some tie to a place for me to feel that one human being is better by my stay in it.

\* \* \* \*

"I go on with my letter to you, and will tell you about Liesa's *début*. She asked me to witness her appearance in the Orsini dress. It is a matter of the highest importance to her to succeed in her profession, for she is frantic to be



independent, and to be able to rely on her own resources. I have tried to arrange her dress, but it is impossible to make it becoming. As a girl Liesa is plain and rather heavy-looking, but in this page's dress she looks coarse and vulgar. Every now and then too she manifests strange ebullitions of temper, which suggest something wild and gipsy-like in her nature, joined to a matter-of-fact simplicity which make it difficult to rule or guide her.

"I asked her if she was not well.

" ' Yes.'

" ' But you are so pale ?'

" ' To tell you the truth, I have eaten nothing to-day, and I feel rather faint.'

" ' My dear child, how could you be so foolish ?'

" ' Well, dear madam, I must confess to you I wanted to sing my song with great *brio* to-night, so that I have saved up my money and economised my dinner to-day to buy a bottle of champagne, and I shall take it as soon as I am dressed. Here it is; I know how to open it, and I have taken this cup with me."

"I really thought she was mad, and I told her so. But I flew to a repository of eatables in my kitchen, and I brought her some cold chicken, with some bread and fruit.

" ' Now eat this, Liesa, before you go, and then



I will give you something better than champagne to take with it.'

" ' No, no ; I am already late. But you are so good that I will take this with me, if you will allow me. I am very hungry.'

" She went off with the provisions, and though I confess I was a little amused, I was also grieved, and the strange loneliness of her position made my heart ache for her.

" Her entire inexperience and want of the very chief quality which an artist must possess—imagination—was as singular as the matter-of-fact and literal way in which she sought to supply her need of it.

" The coarse earthenware tea-cup which is to hold her champagne is a faithful symbol of the lovely voice in that uncouth and almost grotesque person.

" I was so anxious, however, that I hastened to the theatre, and instead of going to my box, went behind the scenes, and asked to see Mademoiselle Liesa.

" I was too late to prevent some of the champagne being taken, but, fortunately, in time to throw away the greater part of it.

" She was no longer pale. The wine, the voracity with which she had eaten, had flushed her, and I was afraid that her voice would feel the effects of it. It was no use to scold now,



however; but I tried, with the help of my maid who accompanied me, to put some finishing touches to her toilet, and I advised Liesa to sit quite still till it was time to go on.

"She seemed a little downcast.

" 'The fact is, I suppose,' she said, 'I am so unaccustomed to wine, that a little gets into my head, only it has the effect of making me sad and stupid, instead of lively and bright. It was a mistake, but I must do the best I can. How good you are,' and she kissed me with real affection. 'Je me sens bien seule ce soir,' she murmured to herself.

"I assure you I went back to my place with real alarm.

"I was agreeably surprised, however. When Liesa came on, she was calm and self possessed. Her appearance was the signal for a few hisses; but the first notes of her voice, somewhat *voilée* as it was, claimed attention, and though awkward, ill-dressed, and not singing her best, there was evidently such an honest intention of striving to do so, that at the end there was a little applause. I felt thankful, for I dreaded an utter failure, and this, though not success absolute, was very far from a *fiasco*.

"I brought her home. 'What a fool I was,' she said. 'But I did it for the best, and after all I was as hoarse as a raven. I shall sing better next



time, but it *is* mortifying to hear others applauded, and to know all the while one has the real thing in one's own throat. If I were pretty, I need not do much; as it is, I must teach them I am worth listening to, all the same. I must give up the idea of acting—but I will sing contralto songs in a way they have never heard yet. . . .

“‘But I am not surprised,’ she continued. ‘Who could look at such legs without laughing?’ and she very good humouredly laughed heartily herself.

“I was touched, and pleased with her *naïveté* and resolution.

“‘If you had but asked *my* advice, Liesa.’

“‘I know you would have advised me well; but I am so little accustomed to ask any one. I am afraid I rely too much on myself. By the bye, I saw the Princess, *my friend*, in one of the stage boxes. I shall get finely lectured to-morrow, for I could see she was vexed.’

“The next day a letter came from the Princess, but I did not see it. She smiled with great indifference when she told me about it.

“‘What can a lady like that know of an art like mine—of a life like mine. She says I was badly dressed—*à qui la faute?* Here have I been mending this horrid old dress all the morning, for I have torn it in every direction. Look here,’



and she threw herself down on a stool, and played the rents and holes of the unfortunate Orsini's lower garments, while her lovely voice over '*Il segreto per esser felice*,' as if, in of all, she had found that secret."



CHAPTER VI.

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THERE was a great stir in the musical world of Florence. Great expectations had been raised. Though there was much mystery made, the secret had so far transpired that it was known at the club, at Viesseux', at Doney's, that a young, beautiful prima donna was engaged, and that her *début* was expected to be a wonderful success.

Who she was it was difficult to find out, but her name was Italian. It was believed she was married. The eventful evening came. In the morning, Cordelia had been unusually depressed. She did not anticipate failure; but she almost dreaded success. She wondered whether any one would know her. She had a superstitious fear of finding herself confronted with her father, or with Gerard.

Would this act place an irrevocable barrier between her husband and herself? If it did, she must submit, but the pain was sharp as a stab.

Seated alone in her dingy little drawing-room, with her hands pressed before her eyes, with all the loneliness, all the merited (ah! there



was the sting) and unmerited hardships of her lot rising before her, humbled, anxious, depressed, it was difficult to suppose that, within a few hours, the part of the gorgeous Assyrian was to be represented by this pale depressed woman.

There is scarcely a bitterer feeling in the whole full range of sorrowful emotions, which it is the birthright of humanity to experience, than that selfcompassion which we feel towards ourselves as something separate from ourselves. The cup of sorrow must be drained very low before that bitter taste comes into the mouth, for it belongs to its very dregs. While she thus sate, the bell rang. It was the post. A letter was given to her from M. Corsand.

As Cordelia read it, the colour returned slowly to her cheeks, the light to her eyes, as if she had put her lips to some strong cordial. These are the divine charities of life. "A word in season, how good is it." To have felt entirely abandoned, life pressing on us, not with the excitement of a storm, but as a bleak, impenetrable, hopeless darkness—no escape, no aid—walls impervious, but adamant, separating one from one's friends (for who are the friends who, in the crises of our lives, have insight enough even to be conscious of them? there has not been found one to help; no, not one—they are away, or peradventure they sleep), and then suddenly some voice reaches us. We are



not utterly alone ; there is help, there is encouragement, above all, there is love, even for us. Though we should never lose sight of the fact that there is God always, there are moments when, even to the strongest in faith, he is very far—when it needs the audible voice to assure us we are beloved. When a friend breaks the silence around us, and comes to our aid, then he speaks as with the voice of God, and the effect is proportionate.

M. Corsand knew the day that Cordelia was to appear, and he knew enough of her nature to suspect what a reaction she would feel as the day actually came. He had written so that his letter should therefore reach her on that day. These were the acts with which his life was so full. Side by side with great sacrifices, great efforts for others, were these kindnesses which seem so little, but which are so important. A letter written on one day or another, what does it signify to the writer ; to the receiver a whole world of feelings may divide one day from the other. It was this wonderful faculty of understanding what others felt, and doing as he knew they best wished to be done by, which gave M. Corsand such a hold on the affections of all his friends. His letter was a stimulant and a tonic. Cordelia was roused and braced at the same time. The tears which had been glazing in her eyes were wiped away. She had not been out that day, and she determined to breathe a little



of the sharp December air by way of refreshment. It was too late to go to the Cascine ; besides, at that hour it was where the assemblage of all the foreigners then in Florence usually met. She contented herself with a walk along the southern bank of the Arno. The river was full, and the afternoon sun shed sparkles on its tawny, wine-like current. The clear air gave a distinct outline to all the objects around. No dreamy outlines or wavering appearances were here. All was bright, strong, decided. She re-entered the town by the Porta San Frediano, and crossed the river by the Ponte Sta Trinità. For one moment she paused before she did so. This is one of the most striking points of this beautiful city ; the noble houses on the left hand, in a curved sweep, border the city beside the river up to the woods of the Cascine, with the mountains behind them. The sunset loves that western sky, and is never more gorgeously appareled in any clime. Its last tints seemed to give a halo to the white statues at the foot of the bridge. On the right hand the view is more picturesque. The striped marble front of San Minato looks transparent in the rays of the moon which is shining above it ; the heights slope down more abruptly, and with more varied effect. The houses are older, dingier, and more irregular ; and here, in the centre, we look at that triple loop of the old goldsmith's bridge, through which the

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landscape is so marvellously and quaintly framed. The light is so strong, and the water so clear, that the arches of the bridge seem like rings half in and half out of the water; rings which bind this capricious Triton to its feudal service.

No one can stand on this spot and not be struck with the beauty of Florence. Other cities may be grander, more imposing, but there is a coquettish *riante* loveliness on all sides of you here; there are such storied memories to enhance it, and the bright incisive light which glitters on all sides, sets it off with such splendour, that to most persons it is quite unrivalled. Then the background of the mountains is in such fine contrast, and gives the tone of the whole. It is the velvet glove and iron hand, and it symbolises the character of the people, and of their history. Courteous, smiling, rarely aggressive, but resistant and persistent.

Cordelia returned home, re-read her letter, and felt calmed and soothed into perfect serenity.

She went to the theatre early, dressed quickly, but without flurry, and awaited the moment of entrance with an equanimity which would have surprised herself, had she thought of herself at all, but she had resolved to think of nothing but her part. She had dressed herself with great care, but she was too young. With that one drawback, which told somewhat badly in the



scenes with Arsace, she was as exquisite a representation of Semiramis as could be conceived.

That name which has come to us through the darkness of centuries, has a weird, sphynx-like charm. It has floated to us on a sea of blood, it is true; but there is a grandeur in it which has prevented its being submerged with all the others of the time.

Cordelia had sought to give it the antique colouring: not to personate only the beautiful, impassioned, regal woman, but the gorgeous, barbaric grandeur of an Assyrian queen.

She succeeded. She sang the florid, rich music perfectly; that, however, has been often done; but she gave the whole part a meaning and an impressiveness which, in its most majestic personations, had never been witnessed before.

It was more than a success, it was a triumph.

Before she slept that evening she wrote to M. Corsand.

While all the *cafés* were ringing with her praises, there was little gratified vanity in the heart of the applauded singer; and had anyone looked at her as she laid her head on the pillow, they would have seen that there were again tears in her eyes. Strangely enough, her voice and the genius of her acting were the themes of the praise, but not her person. One or two muttered, "Un bella donna davvero," but all the critics—



and who in Florence is not a critic—were writing in their eulogiums of her art, and sparing in notice of her person. It was so evident that she herself thought so little of it, and was so entirely wrapped up in her wish to act and sing well, that it impressed the audience as any other strong desire will make itself felt in a mass of people.

Her pronunciation was so pure, that it was difficult to detect she was a foreigner. At Doney's and Vitali's, bets were taken to what country she belonged, and many were inclined to think she must be a Russian. At a breakfast table in Via Larga next morning the following conversation took place.

"I never saw such a likeness."

"To whom?"

"To Miss Ashton."

"My dear Norton, you rave about Miss Ashton; this is the fiftieth time, to my knowledge, you have found out some wonderful likeness to Miss Ashton, and we have generally found you most widely mistaken . . . ."

"I know I have been"—even Norton had learned to interrupt his aunt—"but this is quite different. Except that this lady looks older, she is the image of Miss Ashton."

"There it is, my dear boy; except that she looks older, except that her eyes are a different



colour, except that she is a Russian, or a Greek, or a Spaniard, or an anything else but an English-woman. I was at the opera, and really did not perceive the likeness; you will, of course, say I am not such a good judge as you are; but I must answer that remark by telling you that I think you paid rather more attention to Miss Ashton than your respective positions warranted. Now do not reply, my dear fellow; you know that I consider myself responsible to Sir Arthur as to your associates and friends. Miss Ashton was all very well, but she was rather conceited and high in manner, and I certainly found her wandering about the hotel at St. Gervais in a very odd way the last day. I never can forget how a very ill-bred Frenchman opened his door and stared at her; that was not her fault, you will say; but why was she there?"

Mrs. Watson did not wait for any reply, but, shrugging her shoulders, which was another objectionable habit of hers, left the room; Norton, more delicate looking, but taller and older in appearance, sat still; he was turning over in his mind how he could manage to clear his doubts.

He took the newspaper, and saw that the opera was for that night again. There was an allusion to the wonderful genius of the *débutante*, the Signora Corda.

Almost unconsciously he found himself at the



door of the Pergola. He paid for a box and lingered. At last he summoned up courage, and asked if the address of the Signora Corda was known.

The man's face widened into the most vivacious grin as he gave it. After the young man had left, he and his companion seemed most hilarious on the subject, and whispered together with much apparent enjoyment.

Norton was so shy that when he reached the door he would never have summoned courage to ask to see the Signora Corda, but, fortunately for his desire of identification, before he had rung, the door was opened from within, and Cordelia herself stepped out.

"Miss Ashton, I have found you at last ——"

Cordelia was motionless with surprise. Her poor young admirer had so completely passed from her thoughts.

"I am so glad," went on Norton, when he had recovered breath. "I thought I should never see you again. Will you let me come and see you sometimes?"

Cordelia hesitated.

"Do not be so cruel as to forbid me, I beseech you." The eagerness of the youth made him tremble from head to foot. "I want to tell you about my cousin Gerard. He is in London."

Cordelia started.



"You may come occasionally," she said, "but on one condition; you must not inform the Watsons that I am here, or that I sing under the name of the Signora Corda."

Norton stared.

"It is you, then?"

"Yes; and I am so much engaged in study and practice that I can admit you but rarely. How is Lucy, Mr. Clayre?"

"Miss Norris? I remember: she left last winter. She met, at Rome, an old friend of hers; they were married; it seems it was an old engagement, and she went back to England with him."

"How glad I am—if she is happy."

"She must be happier than she was with us. My aunt was rather cross to her after we got to Turin."

"Why?"

"I do not know."

"Good morning, then, Mr. Clayre; I will not detain you," and Cordelia passed out. At that moment, and while poor Norton stood watching her as she walked on, he heard his name called, and an open carriage drew up.

In it were his aunt and another lady. His aunt had, as usual, been haranguing her companion; but the lady did not appear to be listening to her; her head was turned away, and her



eyes were also following the slight, graceful figure moving down the street.

"This is my nephew, Mr. Clayre," said Mrs. Watson, at the end of her speech. "Norton, the Princess Bifrons has asked me to introduce you to her."

"I am glad to make your acquaintance. I knew Sir Arthur well; also a cousin of yours, or a brother, Mr. Gerard Clayre."

The English was very good, though the accent, especially in pronouncing the name, was very foreign. The speaker was a small woman, with a very soft voice, and a very soft manner. Norton, who was almost as shy as ever, and whose head was full of Cordelia, had bowed, but stood silent.

He was examined by a pair of grey eyes, which seemed at a glance to read through his character, and to understand his nature. Yet the eyes had that averted look, and were of that full, projecting shape, which is peculiar to short-sighted persons.

He bowed, and the carriage went on.

"That was the Signora Corda, I think," said the Princess to Mrs. Watson. "Does your nephew know her?"

"No, he never saw her till last night; he is a most simple fellow; the Signora Corda resembles a person he greatly admired, and I dare say he has tried to verify the resemblance. He is



the most susceptible lad, and I believe his grandfather considers him deficient. You will say he scarcely looks so, and he certainly has rather pleasing countenance; I think he is much what other youths of that age are. A marriage with a good sensible girl would be the making of him."

Mrs. Watson thought her eldest daughter answered this definition exactly.

"You said, I believe"—and she was off again, when she was brought to a stop.

"His cousin married a public singer, I think?"

"No; oh no."

"But against the wishes of his family?"

"Yes."

"Where is she now?"

These questions followed so fast on her replies, without admitting of any discursive additions, that Mrs. Watson was almost suffocated.

"I really do not know—or indeed, I may say, I do not care"—only a smile stopped her now, and she went on—"I am sure you must think that an ill-natured speech, but in fact I have been so little in England lately, that with the exception of Norton, who came abroad especially consigned to my care by Sir Arthur, I know nothing of them—the Clayres I mean—and, as it is, I must write to Sir Arthur and tell him I am going to Germany, and that the doctors say Norton had better remain here for the present. I do not



know what to do, for he is too delicate to be left quite alone, and yet—”

“I know of an apartment in Via Maggio, which belongs to a woman I am interested in: if you can place him there, he will be in excellent hands. She is an Italian, but she married an Englishman, who is now, however, dead. His death diminished her resources very much, and she lets part of her house. If your nephew can find rooms there, she will be like a mother to him.”

“Thank you, that is very fortunate; I will see about it immediately. Thanks, Princess.”

The door of the carriage was opened, and there was nothing for it but to get out. The Princess Bifrons gave her orders and drove on.

“It is astonishing,” she murmured to herself, “how many accidental circumstances help those who are resolved to help themselves. That woman has been very useful to me, though my ears are all bruised with her cataract of words thrown so unmercifully over one. And then, that poor lad, who has not three months’ life in him I can see, and above all—Liesa!”

The day after her triumph, a note was brought to Cordelia while she was at breakfast. It was addressed to the Signora Corda, but on opening it, she found an inner envelope addressed to Madame Cordelia Clayre. The name made her

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start, and at the first look of the hand-writing she turned pale.

She opened it, and as she read it, her eyes flashed for a moment. She then rose and rang for her servant.

"Who brought this letter?" she said.

"A man-servant."

"Will you tell him to come in? I will give him the answer."

The servant, a young man who looked about eighteen years old, entered.

"Who sent you?"

"The Princess Bifrons."

"Will you tell the Princess there was no answer to her letter?"

"What name shall I say?"

"Tell her the Signora Corda has no answer to give from Madame Clayre."

The young man looked up at her earnestly, but was silent.

"You understand"—and she repeated it sternly.

"Certainly, madame"—and with a most respectful bow he left her.

Cordelia thought he had a pleasant and intelligent face in that mechanical, half conscious way in which we notice something external, while our inner thoughts are absorbed in some subject connected with the past.

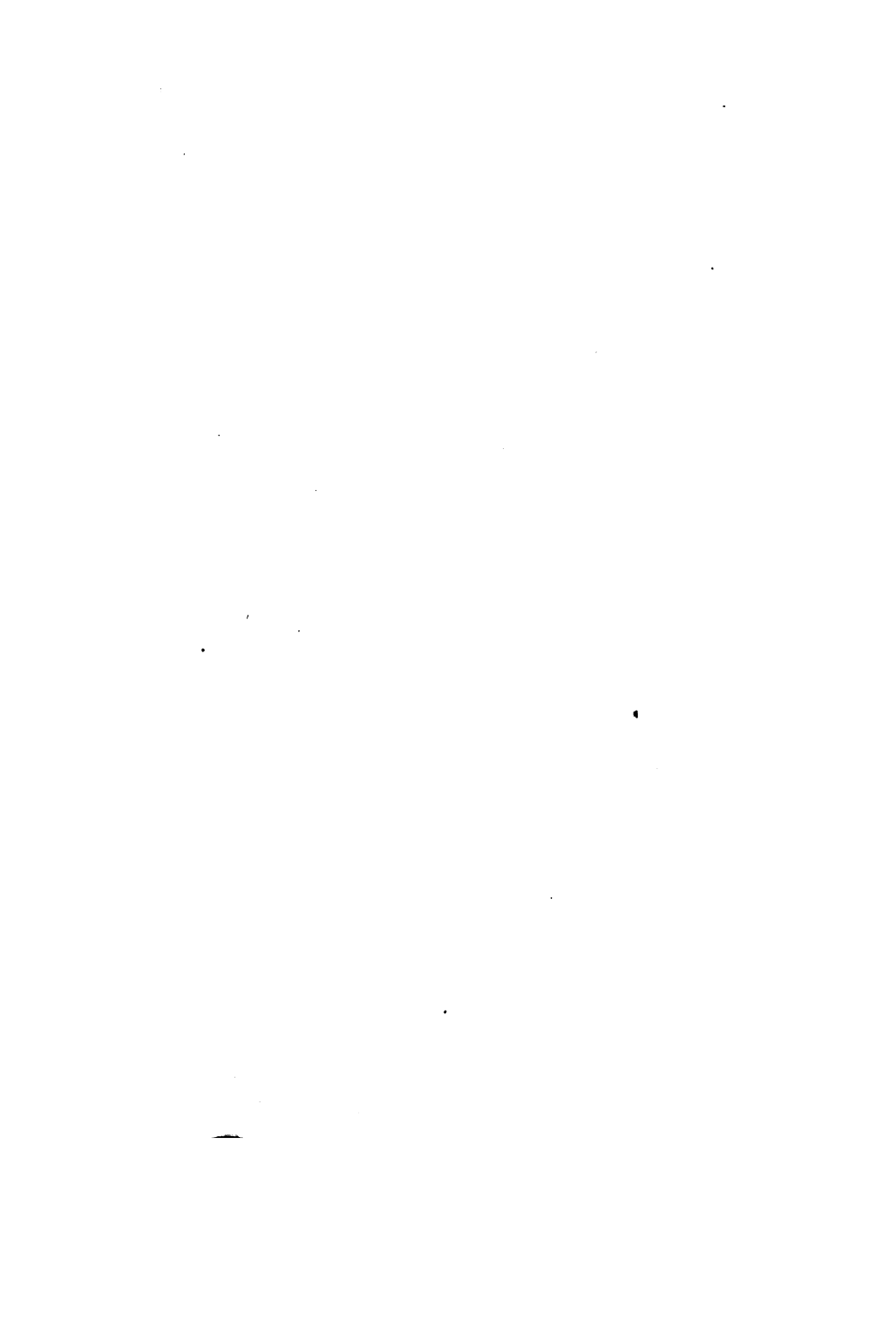


Yesterday, she thought, I was encouraged by M. Corsand's letter to commence my enterprise; to-day, this communication from *her* damps all my satisfaction at my success. Strange that the good and evil genius of my fate confront me both and at once at this crisis: no matter, voluntarily I will never see or hear her again. It is my own fault if I acknowledge the identity between Signora Corda and Cordelia Clayre, and so far I can resist her.

She gave orders that evening that she was never at home to the Princess Bifrons; and she resolved she should leave Florence the moment her engagement was over—but till then—alas!









## BOOK IV.

## CHAPTER I.

THE year had almost gone through its slow circle, before Gerard Clayre was sufficiently convalescent to go out. But a great delicacy remained, and all hopes of his return to India had to be delayed. The doctor shook his head. He would have wished to have sent his patient out of England, but he was an old friend of the family, and he knew that financial circumstances would prevent this completion of the cure. There was also another reason: Gerard was anxious about aunt Anne. Aunt Anne had suffered considerably from the shock to her nervous system, and the disarrangement, for nearly ten months, of some of her habits. Ivy had been indefatigable. She had nursed her brother almost alone, but still there was an unavoidable confusion occasionally, and aunt Anne had been much annoyed. Gerard's desperate illness had brought the shadow



of death into the house. The spot which hitherto had been the abode of all kinds of small cares and petty observances, was now consecrated, and, as it were, transfigured, by this awful presence. It was too rarified an air for aunt Anne to breathe, and she gradually drooped.

Gerard's mental gloom seemed to increase with his return to health. After the few words in which he had forbidden Ivy to name the persons against whom he entertained such a deep-rooted resentment, a barrier had sprung up between the brother and sister. Ivy was all affectionate kindness, but an unavoidable reserve shadowed the frankness, clear as daylight, which she had hitherto manifested. Besides, the reserve, there was blame. Ivy felt that Gerard was to blame, at all events, in the first cause of quarrel.

Ivy's childish love for her brother still continued, but she felt that she stood on equal ground with him now. His word was no longer law to her. She discussed, argued, remonstrated, with him. She laughed at him, and succeeded, sometimes, in rousing him from his gloomy meditations. "What are you doing, Ivy," said he, one afternoon to her, as they sat together after dinner. This was one of the innovations. After the six o'clock dinner, aunt Anne went up-stairs to enjoy her evening nap in quiet and solitude; the brother and sister remained down-stairs till tea-time.



Gerard smoked the mildest of cigars, and walked up and down the room, or lounged in an arm-chair that had been brought down for him. Ivy, curled on the carpet before the fire, strained her eyes over some book, or talked to her brother, if he was disposed to be communicative.

"I am finishing this book Dr. Faile lent me."

"What strange books you like to read!"

"I like to read everything. I have the digestion of an ostrich, in the way of reading," answered Ivy, laughing.

"What is the use of it all? I do not see, for my part, that a woman needs so much plodding over print and paper."

"Oh, Gerard, how old-fashioned you are!"

"All I ask of a woman is to be good-humoured, lively, affectionate—"

"And pretty. Own that is a man's first claim on a woman."

"Pretty, of course; to know how to dress, and above all, to know how to *love*. That is a knowledge she will not find in books, Ivy. The most ignorant are sometimes the most gifted in that art."

"Gerard, you used to speak so differently."

"I have seen my error. There is nothing like an experience such as mine for disenchanting one of all one's heroic visions."



Ivy felt stung, and there was a silence. Gerard sat down and resumed.

"But tell me, seriously, Ivy, what is the use of all this toil and study that I have silently observed since I have been better?"

"I have tried to learn all I could, thinking that I might perhaps be able, one day, to be no longer dependent on aunt Anne."

"In what way?"

"I might do something towards my own support."

"How foolish the child is! Fancy my allowing it, any of us allowing it."

"There it is," said Ivy, somewhat bitterly, "I know we are told to satiety that women can make their own fates, that no path is shut to a woman, that all the old barriers have been broken away, and yet, unless a woman is absolutely penniless and friendless, she is never allowed to act, as all men in her situation would feel bound to act. Here you and I stand, brother and sister; you are put into a profession, you are obliged to earn your own living; and yet, I, with no better prospects than yours, am scouted if I even hint at such a thing. It would be considered right if I lived as a poor relation with Sir Arthur, or if I hung like a weight on your hands; my outfit would be paid to India, where I should be sent to be married;



but if I wished to do, in any one way, what every youth of my own age is doing, I should be prevented."

"Because you have friends to take care of you; would it be very chivalrous of a man like me, to let a young girl like you, be buffeted about the hard world? Would it be generous? Why, Ivy, you might take the chair at the next woman's question meeting, if you talk in that style."

"But seriously, Gerard, do you not think, if work has to be done, we must not stop to consider whether it is right, as women, to work, but whether the work itself is a right work; not expecting praise because we, as women, have done it, but only according as the work itself is well wrought or not? At least, one of our noblest women says this."

"Seriously, Ivy, I do not object to this last dogma of yours, but there is almost as much cant one way as the other, now-a-days."

"All that will right itself; remember how long the tide has been the other way, and even now how few can put their theories into practice. I may feel as full of zeal and energy as I like, but what can I, Ivy Clayre, do? I could not, unless I quarrelled with aunt Anne and with you, do one of the hundreds of things I want to do."

"Name one, and let us see."

"The things I want to do require money. How would you approve of my earning it?"



"Women make fortunes, now, writing. I confess I am not fond of authoresses—"

"But—"

"But, still, that is carried on with a great deal of privacy?"

"But what is the necessity of so much privacy?"

"Ivy, you are too bad if you do not see it."

Ivy shook her brave little head.

"But I have not the gift of composition. I should like to visit schools, to have classes, to attend the work-houses, to nurse in the hospitals."

Gerard looked amused. "You are a precious darling little nurse, I can answer for it."

"But all this requires money, and I have none. But supposing I had not the faculty for writing, but that I had for painting, or sculpture, or music, or acting . . . ."

Gerard's face darkened: "I certainly should not allow my sister to be an actress."

"Listen to me," he added; "all I fear (and perhaps, after all, I differ less from you than you think) is, that in this feverish desire of self-assertion and of superabundance of head activity, women may forget that their action is not less powerful when indirect. When it works through another. In the union of marriage, for instance, if a woman makes a man's home happy, if her companionship is an encouraging and soothing one, though it is the man whose head



or hand labour may actually earn the money, she contributes to it no less. I say it with all limitation, leaving the greatest margin for exceptions, that, in general, self-forgetfulness, self-devotion, self-abnegation, are not found in great artists, using the word to express its largest meaning. Their god is a jealous god, and asks all the man or woman. The fire which the vestals had to keep up is symbolic of the entire absorption of the individual woman in the genius. Everything else must be sacrificed to the maintenance of the fire."

Ivy could not help starting, for those were almost M. Corsand's words. Was there truth in them?

"Yes, but exerting the self-denial and strength of purpose, which a duty like devoting oneself to any art must require, completes the character, does not limit it.

"It limits it, decidedly. The fire is extinguished if the woman seeks a woman's natural ties. Men who love women of genius, are very unfortunate, Ivy; the promise of exceptional happiness is held before them; a great flame glitters in their eyes; but, poor moths, they are soon consumed, and the light burns on to consume other moths. The woman of genius may be making an experiment; she wants some particular feeling, to add to the range of her experience. She analyses her own feelings, she dissects yours, and then, when her



need has been served, she drops you and turns to something else. She strings you on to her necklace of emotions, and is richer by that item added to it. She is to be ministered to, and not to minister. While her burning sympathies are enlisted for some great national object, which is to feed thousands, you are perishing for a drop of water at her side. No ; no woman of genius understands true self-forgetting sympathy, deep, earnest, enduring love."

Ivy was silent. She felt what a sore spot she had touched in Gerard's heart, but she was not sorry she had done so. That he had totally misunderstood Cordelia, and that Cordelia's own pride and resentment had added to the mistake, she feared ; but truth will prevail, thought Ivy. They have both good hearts. They must come to the truth at last. At this time, Ivy would often read some of Gerard's old letters written from Naples, before his marriage. One of these began thus :

" I am at Naples, but do not expect a syllable about Naples. Novels, poems, plays, all tell you quite enough about it. I feel it, but no words of mine could describe it. Besides, all the beauty, all the delight of Naples, and Naples itself, seems to me crystallised and centred in one fact. Dear, you and I have often spoken of my wife to be—of the beauty, sweetness, refinement, she was to pos-



sess. Well, Ivy, I have seen her, and, beyond and above all this, she has the rare gift of genius.

"Sir Arthur thinks a man a fool for marrying early. To me it seems a man's only chance. How all his career would be sweetened, if, at the very onset, he had at his side the one being whose love would inspire effort, and be the guerdon of success. Oh, what visions of a home rise before me, with her and with you too, Ivy! How bravely a young man could confront toil and struggle, if a girl's little hand was in his, to encourage and to soothe! You would love Cordelia if you knew her; Cordelia is her name.

"Sir Arthur gave me a letter to his old friend, Princess Bifrons. A charming person. We are capital friends. A little *passée*, but very handsome still. She has been most civil. I shall owe her a debt of everlasting gratitude, for she introduced me to Mrs. Vibert. Who is Mrs. Vibert? An English lady who lives abroad. You will say that this letter is a rhapsody if I describe Mrs. Vibert to you, so I will content myself with telling you that Mrs. Vibert knows aunt Anne well; was at school with her in Paris, and therefore received me with the most gracious kindness, as the nephew of her old friend. She is well born and very rich, and from her personal character as well as her fortune leads society here. Owing to her influence Princess Bifrons has obtained a



footing here ; for, with all due deference to our dear grandfather, his friend has had the misfortune of being a good deal talked about. It was reported that as a young girl she had married far beneath her rank, that her father separated her from her first husband, that the poor devil disappeared, and she was re-married to the Prince Bifrons. At his death, his enormous estates were bequeathed to her, and his brother, it is supposed, set afloat these stories for the purpose of disputing the will and robbing her of her fortune. So far she seems to be the injured party, but there is some story of a child who disappeared with the first husband, and whose existence, if alive, is totally forgotten by the Princess. These stories were circulated, and would have prevented the Princess from being well received, had not Mrs. Vibert, in her generous impulsive way, befriended her. She says, the world is so unjust to women that she thinks it a duty, unless facts are thoroughly "proven," utterly to disbelieve them. She received her and all was smooth, and the Princess's own attractions have done the rest. Mrs. Vibert is a noble creature, imprudent, rash, fearless, but generous and unsuspecting to a fault. She is extremely beautiful ; a matured queenly beauty which is beyond all doubt or rivalry. She has the impetuosity of a young person, but the magnanimity of one



whose experience makes her view life from a height far above all petty heart-burnings or conventionalities. She has the best society at Naples at her feet. The only person I meet there whom I dislike is a Frenchman. He is highly thought of by all, and is evidently Mrs. Vibert's most intimate and honoured friend. He is very clever, has a quiet, calm, rather disdainfully absent manner, not aggressive, only indifferent, yet, somehow, I dislike him. He irritates me, and what, perhaps, I dislike most, is the influence he has over Cordelia. Who is Cordelia?

"Cordelia Ashley is Mrs. Vibert's adopted child. Her parents are country people in Devonshire, very respectable, but second-rate people I should say. I think she is the only girl I have ever seen I should like you to call "sister." She is so simple and guileless; Shakespeare's Cordelia could not wear a purer aspect. And with this girlish gentleness of exterior, there is thought, will, power, passion. You should hear her sing. The Princess tells me she is going on the stage. I cannot believe it. No parent could permit such a thing. After the inane prettiness of London damsels, I feel as if some poet's dream had been brought to life for me. Rosalind must have looked like her, or Imogene, perhaps. How I regret that hitherto my life has passed without my seriously undertaking any profession. If I



had only a home in which I could enshrine such a treasure ; but Sir Arthur is like a dragon in the path of my dreams. And then there is a horrid possibility hanging over me, of being involved in a most foolish debt. I became guarantee for a friend—a mere nominal guarantee it was affirmed when I was asked to put my name below his, but it turns out that I may be called upon to pay in an actual and not nominal way.

“ Sometimes, too, I have a notion that I am not the only one who loves her. That Frenchman ; and yet he is double her age and she is so frankly confiding in her manner to him. To me she is rather distant, but I have met her eyes sometimes. It is one of my prejudices, or faults, or what you will, to resolve on being the first love of my wife. The first freshness of the rose must be mine, or I will not gather it. An angel, with paradise for her dowry, would have no charms for me, had I reason to suspect she had loved before. I have always detested the system in England of hawking girls about from ball to ball to see and be seen. From eighteen to twenty how many times does a London girl fancy she is in love ! Pshaw, it is odious to think of it.

“ About Cordelia there is an exquisite bloom, if I may so call it, of emotion and feeling, and that is what enchants me most in her. If I am mistaken—were it at the altar step—I would leave her ; but,



it is not so ; a thousand times, no. Mrs. Vibert is most gracious to me, and encourages my visits. At times I think she would be glad to see Cordelia my wife, but that must be an hallucination, for in what way am I worthy of her ?”

Ivy read over these passages, and tried to reconcile this exuberance of feeling with the bitter animosity which was now perceptible in all he said about his wife. She could so well fancy Cordelia in those bright and happy days. But, what had changed and tarnished the radiance of that golden dream? That Frenchman—was it possible it could be, M. Corsand? Oh, it was futile to attempt to fathom the mystery ; enough, that its shadow was over all.

Like all idle men, Gerard threw the whole weight of his idleness on the good-natured sister, who was willing to leave her own occupation at any moment to walk, to talk, to listen, or to do whatever the whim of the moment made him choose. It required a strong fresh nature like Ivy's to be able to bear this. She was never wearied or dispirited, and though at the time Gerard did not appear to modify his opinions, it is certain that he could not associate with a woman so good, and true, and pure, without being influenced to think more highly of the sex which he was condemning in such a wholesale way. The selfishness of thus appropriating Ivy's time did not occur to him. She was a



woman and a sister. What could she have better to do? Gerard had, in spite of this egotism, an affectionate disposition. Neither public school nor college, nor London seasons, had been able to chill a warmth of heart, which must have been inherited, like Ivy's sturdy good sense, from the mis-alliance so feelingly deplored by the Aunt and grandfather. The cold lethargic current, which was like ice in aunt Anne, and like lead in Sir Arthur, must have inherited warmer, brisker, particles before it flowed in Gerard's and Ivy's veins. Then, though four-and-twenty, Gerard was more of a boy than is usual with the precocious young men of the present day. His delicate health caused this. But he had one great fault, a stubborn pride which when offended became implacable. To be deceived by a person whom he had loved, was as much a blow to his pride as to his affection.

Sir Arthur came to see him once or twice. He generally saw him alone and after these visits, Gerard was always found by Ivy cross, indignant, and more bitter than usual. Once she was in the back drawing-room alone, her aunt had gone out on her monthly expedition of visits, and though the folding doors were closed, she could hear Gerard's voice, in a haughty raised tone, asking, "Who was your informant?"

"The Princess Bifrons."



"The Princess Bifrons! Has she been here?"

"Gently, if you please. She was in London last July twelvemonth. She told me she knew your wife, that she (the Princess) had written to her the day before she left England, had asked her to stay with her in Paris, and had received a most peremptory refusal."

"Indeed."

"It is too late now to recur to the old topic, but when I think that but for your headstrong folly you might have been . . . Norton I could never hope anything from, but *you*—"

"What?"

"Never mind; only remember that as we all bear the name of Clayre, I will not sit down and see it dragged through the dust."

"What do you mean?"

"You understand me—if you have risked the honour of that name by bestowing it on—well, no matter; only if that name runs a chance of being disgraced, I shall remind you that marriages can be dissolved."

"Do you not think I should be the first to take steps in that case?"

"I really cannot tell—infatuated and bewitched as you have been, from what I hear, you should have doubted her from the first."

The conversation ended.



Ivy now knew the name of the person from whom Cordelia had received the letter at the Ferry, through Carlo, and remembered her agitation when speaking of it.

When she went to her brother she did not find him in the room where this dialogue had taken place. He had gone to his own room and had given orders not to be disturbed.

The next day he looked much as usual, but Ivy observed that he was more silent and absorbed than she had yet seen him, as if he were maturing some resolve.

Ivy knew that Sir Arthur, on the subject of his name, was as frantic and impracticable as Mr. Ashley on the subject of "foreigners" or "the theatre," and as persistent and antagonistic as aunt Anne on the subject of "manner," and Ivy's derelictions from it.



## CHAPTER II.

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“ I HAVE had the strangest letter from Norton, dated St. Gervais—a letter which is twelve months old. It has been to India, and been sent about from place to place, and sent back,” said Gerard one day to his sister. “ I do believe, poor fellow, he is in love.”

“ In love ! ”

“ He raves about a certain Miss Ashton, who is, or was, his Aunt Watson’s governess *pro tem*. Those governesses are always artful jades.”

“ What does he say ? ”

“ The usual folly. Truth to say, it is not very flattering to one’s self-love, but fairly in for it, there is little difference between the wisest and weakest of us. I hope, however, this may not be a flirt. Norton is such an affectionate fellow, and is so grateful for any kindness, that it would be barbarous to deceive him.”

“ He is so very shy that I cannot fancy his coming out of his shell sufficiently to distinguish any one, or to be distinguished by them.”

“ Exactly so. She must have drawn him on.”



"When he was here he seemed afraid to look at me, and blushed scarlet when he spoke."

"Who did he come with?"

"Sir Arthur."

"Humph! Should you ever see Norton without our beloved grandfather, you will find him different."

"I did not know he was so fond of you."

"I have been able to be kind to him once or twice, poor lad, and that is quite enough to create a most undeserved gratitude in him."

"Are they not kind to him?"

"Kind! It makes me hate them to feel how they have worried away that boy's intellect and health. Of course there has been no glaring ill-treatment; the boy has been neglected, repressed, and suppressed, till he has no spirit or strength left."

"What could have been the object?"

"You dear, innocent goose! Every object. Sir Arthur, or rather Lady Clayre (for she has certainly been the most to blame) thought the more weakly dependent they could keep him, the better tool he would be in their—rather in her—hands. Remember he will be Sir Norton, and that Lady Clayre and her family, will, on Sir Arthur's death, sink into nonentities."

"How wicked!" and Ivy's eyes sparkled with indignation.



"Whenever I was able—rarely enough, Heaven knows!—I stood up for him, and did what I could—very little, but sufficient for him to have taken quite a fancy to me. Latterly they managed to make out I was a reprobate, and a disgrace to the family, and a fellow to be cut. Before them he was obliged to yield; but do you know, Ivy, the night before I left England, he wrote me a boyish, illegible scrawl, enclosing me a twenty-pound note he had got somehow. He knew I was as poor as a dog."

"How old is he?"

"Twenty or twenty-one—just old enough for an artful woman to make a fool of him. It would be good fun though if he got married to her. How awfully done Lady Clayre would be."

"But any one can see——"

"What a soft chap he is. But remember he is heir to a baronetcy, and will have a good income and a beautiful estate. You must not think, my dear, unworldly Sis, that all women are made after your pattern."

"Nonsense, Gerard!"

"It is not nonsense, it is the sober truth. Men are worldly, mercenary, tuft-hunting, what you will; but for true unmitigated baseness as regards money, or rank, or position, commend me to a woman."



"I do not like to hear you speak so," said Ivy, with generous indignation.

"My dear, I know your amiable sex, and whoever has known them will say much the same. There are glorious exceptions, of course; but women *en masse* are——"

"A mistake, I suppose," and Ivy playfully put her hand before his mouth.

"A mistake which men have more and more reason to deplore and despise. A woman is a creature who has nerves instead of heart, who has whims instead of passions, temper instead of feeling. The one chief mobile of her whole organisation is vanity; to feed that she will assume any disguise, even that of an angel of light, and let that be once satisfied, and she cares for nothing else."

"Men often blame women for sorrows which they bring on themselves."

"Set aside their conduct to men, though from first to last it is a course of treachery, ingratitude, and heartlessness, but look at them with each other. Look at their friendships; look at all their relations with their own sex. Do not sisters invariably love their brothers best?—daughters, their fathers? Look at their contemptible jealousies, their bitter rivalries, their unforgiving envy. A woman has a woman friend; she generally takes her inferior to herself as a foil, as a



shadow to set off her own brilliancy; but even then she is not satisfied. I would bet against the most enormous odds that could be offered, that, given a certain time, a man could make any woman quarrel with her dearest friend. I have often been amused to try how soon in a conversation I could bring a woman round, first to disparage, then to blame, finally to condemn the adored Matilda or the beloved Sophia, with whom she had been exchanging kisses the moment before."

"You are quite wrong, Gerard, absolutely, entirely wrong."

"The fact is, women at the very best do not want friends of their own sex; they only seek confidants. They want an outlet for their self-love, which the conventional nature of their intercourse with men does not permit. They wish to harangue about their diseases, their loves, their dresses, or to backbite other women. The French were more frank; they did not take women for those purposes, but a confessor. Even now some women are satisfied with a physician to fill up the place which the more designing and deceitful bestow on a friend."

"I can only tell you, Gerard, that my ideal of happiness in this world is friendship, warm, devoted, enduring, with another woman."

"Then prepare yourself for a good heartache,



if not heartbreak. The cruelty I have witnessed in this world has been almost invariably practised by women ; cold, relentless cruelty. Depend upon it, Ivy, women are to be treated as a man I knew in India treated a young tigress. She was so beautiful and graceful that he used to pet her after a fashion. She was allowed to go loose about his tent ; but a bullet was chained to her leg, her teeth had been drawn out, and there was always a heavy whip at hand. Women must be treated so as to be powerless for mischief."

Ivy laughed outright at this tirade, and so heartily that Gerard himself caught the infection ; but under all the exaggeration and absurdity of the conversation, Ivy read the deep resentment against Cordelia which was at the root of all his declamations.

"I will write to Norton," he said, "and give him good advice. He shall not be made a fool of if I can help it. Hang Miss Ashton ! I shall break through her net if I can."

The name of Ashton would have made no impression on Ivy, but in a letter she had had the previous autumn from Miss Ashley it had occurred. Her letters were very brief and very sad. In that letter she mentioned they had had one ray of comfort. In a letter of Lucy Norris's to her mother she said she had met Cordelia, and that Cordelia was well. Lucy was no longer a



mere nursery governess ; she had the entire charge of Mrs. Watson's younger children.

It was the name of Watson struck Ivy. "Did you say that Norton's aunt was a Mrs. Watson?"

"Yes. He is better off with her than with the Clayres. They were obliged to send him there for his health. I fear, however, it is almost too late to be of material service."

"But the governess there, is that Miss Ashton?"

"Yes. What of it? The letter has been following me about so that it is nearly a year old, and they may have changed."

"I thought it was Norris."

"How do you know? Let us see." He took the letter out of his pocket, and mumbled over it. "Beautiful woman—so good-natured—lovely hair—such a soft voice—such kind ways! Faugh! D—d hypocrite, of course! Aunt admires her too. Hum—hum! Teaches the elder girls. A very pretty girl, Miss Norris. There you see you are right. She teaches the younger ones. How did you know her name?"

"I knew her at the Ferry?"

Nothing more was said; but a kind of vague suspicion darkened for a moment Ivy's mind. Could Cordelia have taken the name of Ashton? But then Ivy felt sure that in no way would she have acted so as to deserve any of these accusa-



tions. She would have avoided the very name of Clayre.

When they went up to tea that evening, Ivy observed how pale her aunt looked.

"Are you not well, aunt?"

"Yes, but rather tired, hearing Gerard declaiming downstairs. What has he been talking about so loud?" She paused, but as Ivy did not answer, went on. "He never remembers that in these small houses everything is heard. He talks as if he was at the head of his troop. His manners are not so gentlemanly as they were."

Aunt Anne did not complain, but she was certainly weaker and more languid than Ivy had ever known her. All the feeling of indisposition which she acknowledged was simply that it was impossible to be quiet with a man in the house. That she felt tired, but would be better in the spring. In the spring Gerard must come to some resolve. India was an impossibility. He had a cough. He was still slightly lame, and totally unfit for the exigencies of the service. Yet what was to be done? The sale of his commission might produce something, for he had now no debts; but the interest of the money was too little for more than bare life. Besides, it was hard to be condemned, at the age of five-and-twenty, to vegetate on a bare *pittance* a year.



He had many times proposed leaving Welbeck Street, and going into some quiet lodgings in the country, but had been overruled by Ivy.

"I could not leave Aunt Anne," she said, "and you are not fit to take care of yourself. Own now, with all your prejudices, that women are good nurses."

"My dear Ivy is a good nurse; but, Ivy, I never look upon you as a woman."

"I am much obliged, Gerard!"

"No; you are so rational and quiet, and self-sustaining, as it were, I have a great respect for you, sister mine—and a great love, too."

"Then if you love me, don't go; wait till you are better."

"I feel I am taxing Aunt Anne's patience to its utmost limits. And, after all, what does it matter whether I am better or worse? A good-for-nothing, useless wretch such as I am, had better be finished at once."

"Gerard!"

"Don't be vexed, dearest, but what am I good for? When a man has no health, no hope, look where he will, had he better not be cut down at once? Would to God they had let me die where I fell?"

"But Dr. Faile says if you could spend a year abroad you would be well."

"Exactly so, and then I might return to my profession; but how to go is the question."



Nothing more was said ; but the difficulty was solved in a way they little expected.

A few days after this conversation, Sir Arthur Clayre called on his sister. They were closeted together for some time, and then Gerard was sent for.

When he came down he told his sister that the old fellow was in a great fright. Some busybody friend had told him that his grandson Norton had fallen desperately in love with a singer, and that he was only waiting for his majority to marry her. He would be of age in three months. He could not be recalled, for there was no ostensible reason for doing so. Besides, that would not mend matters, as of course the woman would be too artful to let him go ; and Sir Arthur could not leave England at that moment ; but he was very anxious to send some one to the spot, who might prevent Norton from running his head into the noose of matrimony. Aunt Anne was not quick in her perceptions, but her earnest wish to get rid of Gerard inspired her with the sudden illumination that *he* might be sent. It was the very thing. Gerard was known to be a great ally of Norton's. He could persuade him if any one could, and he should be sent. The proposal was made, and Gerard's expenses were to be paid. He laughed with Ivy at the singer having displaced the governess. He was so thoroughly unhappy and



restless that he was glad to accept the offer. There was no obligation; his spirit would have revolted against that; and he was as anxious as his grandfather, though for much more disinterested reasons, that his cousin should fall into no snare. He knew that no one would be so kind to Norton as he would be, and that no one would have so much influence with him.

He was to set off immediately. It was now December. He had been at home a twelvemonth. Ivy was glad. She knew the change would be of service to him. She hoped in her inmost heart that some chance might perhaps bring him into contact with Cordelia. If so, how much might be done by personal influence! Gerard, who had become very much attached to his sister, was more grieved than she was."

"Take care of yourself, Ivy. Remember I have nothing left but you."



## CHAPTER III.

A GREAT peace fell over the feminine household in Welbeck Street after Gerard's departure. There was an instant falling back into old habits, and the effect on a witness would have been something quite ludicrous. It was similar, on a smaller scale, to that change of decoration which takes place every Sunday morning in the Church of Sta. Trinità del Monte, Rome. At nine the French soldiers go there to hear mass; the aisles are lined with soldiers and officers. Behind the altar, and on each side, stand men in full uniform, the band and brass instruments sound military marches during the ceremony, and the blare of the trumpets and glare of the swords convert the little church for the space of half-an-hour into a most brilliant noisy barrack. At half-past nine it is over, they march out in military order, the echoes repeat the word of march, and then all is instantaneously quiet. A man in black vestments gives a few touches of his broom to clear out any vestige of profane dust, and, as if by enchantment, for you hear no steps, the



chancel, and galleries, and organ loft are filled with closely veiled figures, and another mass is performed to the music of soft, toneless, lifeless, pathetic voices. Sadly, feebly, but with distinct sweetness, the nuns of the order chant the solemn service. Earth's noisy, gaudy sons have passed away, and the sisters of silence have replaced them.

For a week the change was beneficial to Aunt Anne. When the newspapers and the beloved books of travel were taken out as usual, she breathed more freely. Jones's face subsided into serenity after the careworn look it had assumed for the last twelve months, months during which, as she confided to Bessie, she "had been so drove about from morning till night, she had often not been able to clean herself of an afternoon" (that worst of miseries to an English servant), "and as to dressing herself, she had not, so to speak, been dressed at all, for all that time. To Bessie, who was accustomed to Jones's somewhat ambiguous phraseology, the phrase "not dressed at all" conveyed nothing derogatory to Jones's modesty. Bessie herself rather regretted the absence of Mr. Gerard; the change to her had been productive of some pecuniary profit, and had given the house an aspect more congenial to her less ascetic disposition. She was very fond of Ivy, and it had pleased her to see how much more bright and



animated her young mistress had been during her brother's stay.

It was certainly a dismal change for Ivy. Emptiness for fulness, cold for warmth, lethargy for activity. To Gerard she was of use, to her aunt of none. Gerard leaned on her, her aunt bore with her. Since the specimens of Ivy's "oddness" which Aunt Anne had experienced, she had been more reserved with her niece. Affectionate she had never been, but she was now more querulous and less indulgent.

The monotony of Ivy's life would have pressed very hard upon her, but she had more to think of. The subject of Gerard and Cordelia entirely absorbed her. Both so unhappy, and both, she thought, through the estrangement, yearning for reconciliation and pardon.

Gerard had written from Marseilles. He had suffered less from his journey than she expected, and he confessed that every step south was a step gained in health.

This was a great gain.

There was one other subject of comfort to Ivy, the visit to Clayre Court was delayed *sine die*.

The daily walks in the Regent's Park were kept up, for Aunt Anne had almost entirely given up walking herself; and on returning from one of these, Ivy and Bessie met Susie.

The young singer's face was paler, and over all



her person was that indescribable air of neglect which told more surely than anything else that the loved eyes were gone for whom her little artifices, or rather cares of the toilette, had been made.

"How are you, Susie?"

"Pretty well, miss, thank you."

"Have you heard from Carlo?"

"Yes, miss. I was coming to see you to tell you about it. He has written. He is in service, miss, in Florence."

"Indeed!"

"He waits on a lady who is a great singer. I do not remember her name, but a beautiful lady who sings on the stage, and who is as good as she is beautiful."

"I am very glad." Ivy's heart had given a spring. "You do not remember the name?"

"No. It is a foreign one; but she is English, Carlo thinks, and is so famous. She knows Carlo's good friend M. Corsand."

"Ha!"

"He recommended him to her. It was a mercy, ma'am, for there is little to be done in those parts, and now he is putting by a little money at least. Let me see, the name is Cor—Cordee—Corda. Yes, Corda. She lives alone with a maid. Carlo says he wishes I could be her maid."

Ivy felt convinced. "How strange! Gerard



and Cordelia both in Florence! She had then kept her resolution of going on the stage. They will meet, and all will be right then," thought Ivy.

"And you, Susie, how are you getting on!"

"But poorly, miss. Mother's getting so bad! She cares for nothing now, and I work harder than ever; and my voice is weaker." The tears rolled down the poor girl's cheeks. "I do not know what I should do, what would become of mother, if I were to lose my place at that theatre."

"You have work?"

"Yes, miss, more than I can do sometimes; but sitting at it the whole day, and never moving, scarcely gives us bread, and then there's mother—she's broke down quite."

"Could you not get her into the workhouse?"

"I don't know; but if I did, I must go too, and I do not like it for *his* sake."

"But you might support yourself as you do now."

"I am afraid of being alone in that house."

"Why?"

Susie blushed scarlet. "The landlord, ma'am, is so hard upon me—he speaks so strangely. Sometimes he says if I would stay with him he would give me anything I want; at other times he treats me worse than the worst wretch in the street. And, miss, sometimes I think he puts the liquor in mother's way on purpose, as if he



wished for some accident to happen. I could not remain there any way. I sometimes do not know what to do, I am so beset. I sometimes wish I could go to service far, far away, but it seems hard to leave mother."

"But if you got a situation, could your mother go into the workhouse?"

"Yes, ma'am; she was born in the parish we live in."

"I will try if I can help you. I will let you know through Bessie." And Ivy's modest purse was drained of its last sixpence, and she walked home thoughtfully, scarcely hearing Bessie's jeremiads at her side, upon the trials of poor girls in London. Theirs *are* heavy trials. What could be more bitter than Susie's position. Working all day, singing to a late hour at night, with all her nerves overwrought by witnessing her mother's frightful intemperance, and her whole nature galled and insulted by the shameless persecution of the lodging-house-keeper.

Yet in thousands of homes all around us such scenes, such struggles, are going on. Young girls, on the one hand, steeped up to the lips in every trial and every temptation, opposed by every foe to honour, respectability, or virtue; and young girls, on the other, fenced from the least contact with the world without, barred from doing good to themselves or to others.



Ivy showed her progress in good sense by not attempting to speak to her aunt on this subject ; but she took the opportunity to answer Miss Ashley's letter, and mentioned in it her wish to procure a situation for a girl in whom she was interested. To her surprise an answer came by the next day's post. Miss Ashley would be very glad—if the girl Ivy mentioned had no objection to a situation so far from London—if she would see her, and asking her some questions, a list of which she enclosed, and making a set of stipulations which she named, she might, if all was satisfactory, be forthwith engaged and sent down. |

Ivy was rejoiced. It is one of the sweetest moments of one's life when one finds that, by the exercise of a little discretion or a little effort, we have actually served a fellow-creature. No mere almsgiving can be named with it. It fixed the seal to Ivy's chosen destiny. She made a vow to herself that to find out objects to serve, and to serve them, was the only vocation to which she could henceforth belong.

All would have gone on smoothly but for the necessity of seeing Susie at her aunt's house.

For a long time Aunt Anne was inexorable. "My dear, I cannot allow it ; if you go on in this way, where will it end ? Are you of an age, or is this the house, to admit of such things ?"

"But, Aunt Anne, it is nothing but to let in



a very good girl for half an hour, to ask a few questions."

"A very good girl, possibly, but she is a chorus singer——"

"Who earns her livelihood by working and singing, and supports her mother, who is old and infirm." Ivy, not unpardonably, shielded the drunkenness of Susie's mother under the name of infirmity.

"My dear, if we were rich, I would willingly give money to her, but I do not like mixing with those sort of persons unnecessarily. We never know what diseases they may bring with them."

"But, Aunt Anne, how could one ever do any good if we all thought as you do?"

"It seems to me, Ivy, that all *do* think as I do. I never knew of young girls, or ladies, running about the low streets of a town—you are not a clergyman."

"Certainly; but it is not only clergymen who visit the poor."

"Unfortunately," said Miss Clayre, drawing herself up with severity, "now-a-days there are all kinds of innovations—that I know—but a stand must be made, or I do not know what will become of us. I really do not see that the poor are at all better off since all this fuss has been made about them. They clamour much more, certainly, but that is all."



"But, Aunt Anne," said Ivy, earnestly, "here is a poor girl exposed to all sorts of temptation."

"Hush, my dear, do not let me blush for you. That is the worst of all this fuss about charity, modest girls hear and see things which I trust I may die in ignorance of."

Ivy was in despair, but she tried once more.

"It was M. Corsand who mentioned Susie to me."

"M. Corsand!"

"Yes; he took me to see her."

"Why did you not say that before? That makes it different if *he* befriends the girl."

"May she come, aunt?"

"Yes; but this is the last time that such a thing must happen. You can send for her, and you can go down in the dining-room with Jones and see her. You can give her this shilling from me," added Aunt Anne.

Susie came. The answers were all satisfactory, and the affair of the situation was arranged. The next thing to be done was about the workhouse. and, inspired by her success, Ivy had the bright thought of telling Susie to call upon the clergyman who presided over the ragged-school, and told her to address herself to him to help her in that matter. She gave her one of M. Corsand's cards, and wrote under it Susie's name, sent by Miss Clayre. She felt that the affair was



settled. As she sat down in the evening beside her aunt, even Aunt Anne was struck by the bright expression of her niece's face.

"I have not seen you look so well for a long time," she said.

"I am so happy, aunt. Will it not be delightful if we" (we, what subtle flattery in that *we*) "have helped Susie?"

Aunt Anne was not to be bribed by it. She sighed, "I hope it will turn out well, but I confess, Ivy, your disposition often makes me very anxious."

"Why, aunt?"

"You are so very different from what I was at your age. I cannot tell how it is, I am sure I have done my best," said Aunt Anne, helplessly.

"But it is so different, aunt. You were one of many, and had brothers and sisters, and your parents were alive, and, of course, your time was full; but I, you know, have nobody but you and Gerard. Gerard is away, and you never let me do anything for you. I cannot help being interested in so many things besides."

"The fact is, you are odd, Ivy; I always said so, and then, certainly, times are very different; women do and know so many more things than they used to do."

"Of course everything gets on and improves, aunt; women as well."



"Is it improvement, Ivy? The world does not seem so bright as it was in my day. But my head aches a little. Good night; I shall go to bed earlier to-night, I think."

When Ivy went to her room her aunt's words rang on her ears—"The world does not seem so bright as it was in my day." "I wonder if I shall say that as I get old," thought Ivy. "I cannot think that the world was ever bright to Aunt Anne; and yet, perhaps, when she was young, she was not listless and tired as she is now. But I never could live as she does now. It seems so strange that she never should think she has any duties beyond this house. Are we not all human beings? Ought we not all to try and help each other? Did not M. Corsand tell me that it was the duty of each to live in all, as far as we could?—That if we were the children of God, we must do like Him, and God lives in all humanity? It seems to me that wherever I was, however situated, I should be interested not only in the small circle of my own affections, but all beyond as far as I could reach, to help, to serve, to encourage."

This service to Susie gave Ivy the greatest pleasure she had known since the day she had heard Cordelia sing for the first time. It was even sweeter. When she knelt down, as was her nightly custom, her gratitude at having been per-



mitted to lift the burden from a fellow-creature, was most touching ; and her dedication of herself to that service for the future, though uttered with the passionate impulsiveness of youth, had the sincerity and force of mature years. And the vow, unlike many vows made by young impressionable natures, was kept.

Poor Aunt Anne's reflections were very different. When she had disrobed, read the few verses of the Bible which formed her evening devotions, she remained longer awake than usual, thinking of her niece. She thought Ivy's disposition so fraught with peril to herself and others that it made her quite anxious. "She is eighteen," she thought, "in three years she will be of age, and then, whenever I die, she will be her own mistress. No, I will not let her ruin herself. I will send for my solicitor to-morrow and tie up the money more tightly; above all things, I must put it as a request that Sir Arthur and Lady Clayre shall take care of her till she marries or till she is twenty-five years of age, and that she forfeits the legacy if she joins Gerard. Who would have thought she would have turned out so ? But she would fling every shilling she possessed on the first whim, if I did not."



CHAPTER IV.

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THE next morning Ivy was informed that her aunt did not feel well, and would only get up for dinner. She was requested to take the newspaper into her bedroom and read it there.

Ivy obeyed. Miss Clayre did not look ill; she seemed pale and languid, but not much more so than usual. The only thing Ivy remarked as peculiar was the long, fixed look that her aunt gave her as she entered and took her seat by her. It was a curious and exploring look, as if she wanted to find out in what or where was the outward and visible sign of the great difference she felt between her niece and herself.

Ivy read the newspaper as usual—the leading article, the fashionable intelligence, the foreign news. Suddenly she made an exclamation: “Just listen, Aunt Anne! ‘On the 26th, at Florence, there was a performance at the Teatro della Pergola, Florence. It was ‘Lucrezia Borgia,’ and La Signora Corda achieved a triumph. This *débutante* is the same Signora Corda who appeared at first in the part of *Semiramide*.”



This lady, who seems destined to perpetuate the glory of Malibran, is as great an actress as a singer, and obtained most deserved applause. It was a triumph. The stage was literally covered with flowers. She was repeatedly called before the curtain at the end of each act, and every piece in which she sang was encored. Nature has singularly gifted Signora Corda; she has great beauty, a wonderful voice, and the most remarkable histrionic genius." So it went on. It was added that, though there were some doubts, it was supposed the Signora was English.

Ivy put down the paper. The tears ran down her cheeks—tears of joy, for she was now certain who it was.

"What is the matter, Ivy?"

Ivy was silent for a minute, and then, in a low voice, said, "I am sure this is Cordelia, my dearest Cordelia."

"Who—what? Do speak plainly, Ivy."

"Aunt Anne, I am sure this Signora Corda and our Cordelia are one and the same person. I knew she would be the greatest singer in the world."

"Good God! Ivy, are you serious?" Poor Miss Clayre raised herself tremulously in her bed.

Ivy remembered what a shock she must be giving her aunt, and, with a mighty effort at self-control, spoke in a calmer, steadier manner.



"I am afraid you will not like it. I may be wrong, and it is foolish so to excite myself, but I felt as I was reading that this miracle of beauty and genius could be nobody else but our Cordelia."

"*Our* Cordelia—your brother's wife!" Miss Clayre sank back into her pillows. Her very lips were white, as she murmured, "Would that I could have died before this disgrace had befallen us."

Ivy was dismayed. She saw tears, for the first time, stealing slowly down her aunt's cheeks. She could not, even with her knowledge of her Aunt's deeply-rooted prejudices, have conceived that such an effect could be produced by such a cause.

"Leave me," at last said Miss Clayre, faintly, "and send Jones to me."

Ivy rang for Jones, and left. The paper was still in her hand, and it rustled. Miss Clayre opened her eyes, and, calling her back, said—

"Ivy, if you have any regard to your own respectability, to my wishes, be so good as never to mention what you have suspected. It may not be true, that is our only chance. Never let it pass your lips."

Ivy saw she was painfully agitated, and promised. As she went into the drawing-room she could not help giving a sigh of relief as she *threw* herself down on a low stool before the



meagre fire, and again read the paragraph. It brought the picture so distinctly before her, in spite of the verbiage of the newspaper. Her beautiful Cordelia ! how she pictured her to herself. The beauty, the youthful majesty, the deep pathos of the part. What was there to occasion the horror of her aunt ?

A few days passed ; Aunt Anne was still in bed, and still not well. One day, as Ivy was sitting in the dining-room lost in thought, there was a ring, and she was called to speak to Susie. Susie came to say that the clergyman to whom Ivy had sent her had kindly promised to attend to her, and that he had commenced serving her by removing her mother and herself to lodgings in a different part of the town. In a few days more she would be able to go down to the Ferry, for her mother would then be admitted into the workhouse. Susie thanked Ivy most gratefully. She was evidently only too happy to escape from her precarious livelihood, and all its bitter experiences, to go where—if at all events her mistress was strict, for Ivy disguised nothing—there was nothing to be feared in the shape of the daily annoyances, temptations, and terrors of her London life. Ivy accompanied her to the door, for she did not want to call one of the servants ; and as she was standing, saying a few last words in the passage, while her hand was on the handle of the



door, to her surprise some one pushed against it, and Sir Arthur appeared.

"How do you do, Ivy? Sorry to hear Anne is so ill," said he, as he entered. "I have not lost a minute in obeying her summons. Who the deuce is that?" he asked, as his eye fell on poor Susie.

Certainly Susie was a strange-looking visitor to be handed out by Sir Arthur's granddaughter. She was clean, certainly, but her poor battered, soiled straw bonnet looked strangely unsuited to the bright hair, worn *à l'Impératrice*, beneath it. The fact was, Susie always arranged her hair as she wore it in the evening, and sometimes, poor child, did not unfasten the thick lengths after the evening's performance, but let them remain as they were till she dressed on the next evening. The cotton dress was shabby, but over it was a black mantilla which looked stylish; in short, there was that inconsistency in her dress which is often seen in the underlings of the theatre. Sir Arthur noticed that her dress was muddy, and that her shoes were in holes. Susie had saved up money to buy a pair for the evening, but she had not worn them in the daytime yet.

"Who have you got here?" he repeated, as Susie, blushing beneath his looks, was shut out with a kind "Good-bye, take care of yourself," from Ivy.



"A girl I am much interested in."

"Indeed—may I ask why, and who she is?"

"She sings in one of the choruses, and is very poor. She supports herself and her mother."

"She looks anything but a respectable girl."

"She is a very good girl," said Ivy, rather defiantly. "Aunt Anne knows about her. We have got her a place."

"Can I go up to Anne, now?"

"Yes, I think so; but will you wait a minute in the drawing-room while I run up to see?"

"No, she sent for me to come directly, so I suppose she is ready."

At this moment there was a knock and ring, and Mr. Colson, Miss Clayre's lawyer, was admitted. After exchanging greetings, Sir Arthur went upstairs, and left Mr. Colson with Ivy.

Ivy felt rather awed by this new visitor. A faint presentiment of evil seemed to rise before her. Why had Sir Arthur and Mr. Colson been sent for, and why has it been done without telling her? Mr. Colson talked in the blandest and most civil way. He always talked to women so. Affairs, money matters, wills, codicils, were as if they did not exist with him when he spoke to the "fair sex," as he termed them. What should women know of business? His experience had taught him that the mere A B C of pecuniary interests was a dead letter to them. The con-



fused, contradictory way in which they submitted to him their wishes either as regarded settlements or testamentary arrangements, had often struck him as a wonderful phenomenon in the decrees of Providence. Nothing but the supply of lawyers which Providence had also bestowed for the better carrying on of the affairs of this world, could have compensated for this deficiency in human intelligence; as it was, it was not of serious importance, but only a fact to be noted.

Ivy was such a fine girl, that he occupied the time he was waiting in paying her the most glaring compliments. She felt so anxious and bewildered, that she scarcely attended to him, and spoke so little and so absently that he was impressed with the notion that she was deficient in intelligence.

It is a pity, he thought, such a handsome, fine-grown girl as she is should be so dull, but they are none of them over-bright in that family. After all, it matters little, there is not much difference in the real conduct of life between the most stupid and the most clever woman.

After awhile he was called upstairs, and then there was a long and, to Ivy, an apparently interminable time, in which, though she heard steps on the stairs and rings at the bell, no one came near her.

Once, she herself, not being able to resist the sense of mystery which seemed to deepen in the



house, went upstairs. She was met on the first landing by Bessie, who seemed to have been stationed there.

"You must not go in to Missus's room, Miss ; no, indeed you must not," she added, as Ivy seemed rebellious.

"What is the matter, Bessie ?" asked Ivy. "Is Aunt Anne worse ?"

"I don't know as how she is worse, Miss ; but she has the lawyer and Sir Arthur with her, and they are signing papers at a great rate. I will let you know, Miss, directly they are gone. You go down and set by the fire ; you look as pale and cold as anythink. They have sent for the doctor too, I'm thinking."

Ivy went down again. She folded the newspaper and put it on the table. The joy at heart at Cordelia's success was gone to give place to an overwhelming depression she could not account for.

It was one of those dark, foggy days so peculiar to London, when there is a black fog in the street and a lurid fog in the sky. She went to the window. She could scarcely see the houses opposite. Although scarcely one o'clock, one must have lit candles if one wished to see to do anything. There were few passers by in the quiet street, but the rumble of the carriages in the more crowded thoroughfares was loud and cease-



less, mixed with the loud voices of the drivers and coachmen trying to pilot themselves in the fast-increasing darkness. It was not very cold, but the noiseless, unceasing rain made it seem chill and yet close. It was quite dark, and Ivy had returned to her disconsolate seat by the fire, when steps hastily descending were heard, and the drawing-room door was thrown open by Sir Arthur.

"Ivy," he called out, in an authoritative tone, "what are you doing, child, in the dark?" His manner was different from what it had ever been. Usually it was simply indifferent, now it was domineering.

"Shall I ring for candles?"

"No, never mind, I cannot stay now, but you had better go to Anne now; do not stay dawdling here. I shall look in again in the evening. What o'clock shall you be here, doctor?"

And to Ivy's dread and amazement she saw the doctor enter the room.

"I shall look in about nine. Nothing can be done, you know; she is sinking fast, now."

Ivy looked scared for one second, and then without a word sprung upstairs. Jones was crying on the landing-place.

"What is it?"

"Oh, Miss Ivy, Missus is so ill," and Jones's sobs made her inarticulate. "It came on quite sudden; the doctor says it was the agitation of all



them papers, but that it has been coming on for years. It is the heart."

"Let me go in," said Ivy, and she gently opened the door. There were candles in the room, which was fully lighted by them and by a fire which had been lit after Ivy left it in the morning. Miss Clayre looked scarcely paler than when Ivy had left her. Yet there was a look in her face which had entirely changed it. A sort of grey shadow was over it, and in the room was a strange closeness which made Ivy almost faint.

"Dear Aunt Anne, what is the matter?" said Ivy; and she took her aunt's hand tenderly.

The eyes had been closed, but they slowly opened. "Nothing is the matter," she said, in a slow, hesitating voice, "I only feel so drowsy. I shall be well when I have slept. Good night, my dear Ivy," and Ivy saw a faint motion of her lips: she stooped down and kissed her. The heavy eyelids dropped down again over the eyes, but the hand Ivy held pressed hers faintly, and Ivy heard these murmured words, almost as if spoken in sleep: "She is a good child; I have done my best—she will know I have done my best—she will thank me one day—she is a good, good girl."

Jones had followed Ivy, and stood behind her after having drawn a chair for Ivy to sit down on, beside her aunt. So they sat: Ivy motionless, and



as if thought as well as movement were turned to stone : Jones crying silently. Bessie came in once or twice and looked at the fire, stepped gently to the bed, and after some ineffectual proffers of bringing Ivy something to eat, went out again ; but that was all.

" Can Aunt Anne be dying ? " was the question which sometimes rose in terror as if written in flame before Ivy's eyes. But she did not move or speak. She only listened to the breathing at her side. It was peaceful, but seemed to be fainter and at longer intervals—but still she heard it.

At nine o'clock there was a little bustle on the stairs, and Sir Arthur and the doctor entered.

" How is she ? " said Sir Arthur, in a voice which seemed like thunder in the silence.

The doctor snatched up one of the candles, and went to the bedside to see.

Was it the sudden light caused the shiver which Ivy felt in the hand she held. It was all quiet the next minute.

" She is gone," said the doctor.

" Take care of Miss Ivy," said he, turning to Jones, who had given a faint scream on hearing his words.

But Ivy required no care—she was quite quiet. She rose and stooped low to kiss the faded face before her, and then sunk on her knees beside the bed.



When she rose she was still calm, but the tears were rolling down her cheeks.

"Will you tell me—" she said, and could not get further.

"Disease of the heart," said the doctor. "She has had it for many years. I knew her end would be sudden; but you must not stay here, my dear," and he kindly put his arm round her and led her from the room.

Sir Arthur was locking up the drawers and wardrobes, and did not see them leave the room.

Bessie accompanied Ivy to her room, insisted that she should go to bed, and brought her a cup of tea. Accustomed to loud and violent grief, she could not understand Ivy's gentle sorrow.

"What will become of the poor dear?" she asked Jones. "Master Gerard is gone for some time, I doubt."

"I suppose she will have to go to them Clayres," said Jones, who looked like a walking tragedy.

"Then I pity her. Of all the skinflints I ever heard of, that there Lady Clayre is worst. I had a cousin as lived kitchen-maid there. Missus was close, but Lady Clayre is stingy as old Harry himself; but then of course Miss Ivy will have Missus's fortune."



CHAPTER V.

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IVY was stunned with the suddenness of the shock of this death. The life so abruptly blotted out had represented all she knew of home. There had never been any sympathy between aunt and niece, but Ivy was too kind-hearted and affectionate not to have made every allowance for this, and she had so few to love, that her own heart had covered with its abundant tenderness the dry and withered one to which it had been bound. A vine clasps with its profuse tendrils any sapless trunk round which it is trained, and clings to it with its delicate foliage and rich clusters till its barrenness is concealed. Perhaps, as time advanced, there might have been more discrepancies between the aunt and niece, but hitherto nothing had seriously manifested the utter want of harmony in their characters. Aunt Anne was gentle, never ill-tempered or malevolent, and poor Ivy's home, if dull and monotonous, contained no element of harshness or unkindness.

As Ivy sat alone in her room (she avoided the drawing-room, for Sir Arthur used to come every



morning and give orders and write letters there), the sense of isolation for the first few days was most oppressive. She had written to Gerard, to M. Corsand, and to Miss Ashley. Her grandfather had also written to Gerard, but in a very different sense from Ivy. Ivy had urged his instant return to her. The only gleam of comfort was that she supposed she should live with her brother now. She knew that all that aunt Anne could leave would be hers, and though but a trifle, for it was only the savings of the income she had enjoyed and not the income itself, she thought she might manage with that not to be a burden to Gerard, until some opening could be found for her to earn her own livelihood.

Ivy noticed that when she did meet her grandfather he assumed a much more authoritative manner with her than he had ever done before; but she attributed it to the responsible position he had assumed in the house. She heard that the servants had received warning, and she marvelled at what was to be done with the house, for she saw that the furniture was being packed; but she dreaded asking any questions about herself, and waited anxiously for Gerard's arrival. She thought he would be scarcely in time for the funeral, but she hoped it. She had at first intended telegraphing for him; he could not have been further than Marseilles; but Sir Arthur had



said there was no necessity for that, and that it was best for Gerard, in his scarcely convalescent state of health, to be saved the sudden shock.

The funeral took place. The only person who really loved poor Miss Clayre, watched from the darkened windows of the room the decent solemnities which marked the last trace of her passage on this earth.

When they returned the will was read. Ivy was present, and heard. It was all as she knew it would be, and her tears fell fast as she read the enumeration of all the little bequests, all and each to her "dear niece," Ivy Clayre. There was a pause, and then the lawyer, instead of concluding, cleared his throat, and said there was a codicil to the will. Ivy looked up astonished. It was to this purport. All that had been already said was confirmed, but with this proviso. Instead of the trifling sum becoming Ivy's immediately, it was not to be touched by her till she had attained the age of twenty-five, or till she married; and until she married or had reached this age of twenty-five, she was to live with her grandfather Sir Arthur Clayre. If she chose to live with Gerard or Gerard's wife she forfeited it all. Ivy turned pale. It would have been difficult for her to have uttered a word, but she was cut to the heart.

She looked so sad, so desolate in her deep mourning and speechless depression, that even



the callous heart of Sir Arthur was touched. After exchanging farewell greetings with the lawyer and doctor, who left as soon as the will had been read, he went up to Ivy and said, "You must let me replace aunt Anne in everything, my dear child. You see she naturally thought that we should be better guardians for you than that wild Gerard, who has fastened such a noose round his own throat. Who knows what ducks and drakes he would have made of this little nest-egg of yours? You will be safe at all events now. Country air will do you good after all this."

Ivy raised her truthful, steady eyes to her grandfather.

"What was aunt Anne afraid of to have made this change?"

"No change, my dear. You see everything is exactly the same; but I think she was anxious to guard you from the goodness of your heart, which might have led you to put yourself into Gerard's power, or to do wild things yourself, for you are a very independent young lady, I know. She asked me, with tears in her eyes, if I would take care of you, and let you live at the Court. In town it would have been more difficult, but at the Court it is easy enough. By Jove! it is four o'clock. I must be off. Lady Clayre expects us to-morrow or the next day."



"To-morrow?" said Ivy, faintly. "Can I not wait for Gerard?"

"Gerard is occupied with a mission of family importance. I have told him it is unnecessary to come. It would be selfish of you to make him return."

"I cannot be ready to-morrow," said Ivy.

"Well, I will say the day after. You had better pack up everything. The house is to be let. I shall leave Jones in it till it is let, and Bessie will leave the day we go. I have packed up and sent off to the Court some of the furniture. I thought you would like it in your room there. You had better put the books in boxes, and I will send them to Colson, except those, of course, you want. The plate, and all aunt Anne's ornaments, have been put in an iron safe till we deliver them over to you seven years hence. Good-bye, my dear. I will look in to-morrow evening, but I shall be late, I fear."

Sir Arthur put his lips to Ivy's smooth forehead, and was gone. When she heard the door shut, Ivy put her head on the table and sobbed unrestrainedly.

To go to live at Clayre Court! To be in daily contact with Sir Arthur—worst of all, with Lady Clayre. Here had been passive prevention, there would be active opposition. Aunt Anne did not understand her, but Lady



Clayre she knew disliked her. It was a bitter trial.

The news had, of course, transpired, and the servants came up in turn to comfort her. Even the grim Jones had had a corner of her rigid heart softened towards the bright, good-tempered girl who had been the sunshine of the house. Bessie was really attached to her, and feeling herself somewhat aggrieved at the rapidity with which she had been dismissed, vented her displeasure in mourning over her young mistress, as if she were going to be delivered to an ogress at the very least.

But, after a time, Ivy's good sense came to her aid. The elastic temperament of youth made itself felt. She raised her head, and began consoling Bessie with promises that she would never forget her, and that whenever she was her own mistress she would send for her.

She then went up-stairs to commence the inevitable preparations. As she passed her aunt's room she saw the door half open, and stepped in. How changed was that quiet, close, comfortable room! The windows had been opened wide, the carpet looked soiled with the tread of many feet, the drawers were half open, the chairs disarranged—it all looked bare, exposed to light, and wind, and cold. On the bed was the deep mark which showed the pressure of the coffin.



By an instinctive movement Ivy threw herself on the bed, and buried her head on the pillow. It was the last link with aunt Anne, with the only being who had acknowledged Ivy's claims on her, and who had loved her with the unreasoning love of kindred.

Orphanhood pressed hard on Ivy at that minute. That faint, feeble shadow of a mother's love which aunt Anne had shown her was withdrawn, and she felt there was nothing between herself and the hard world. Sir Arthur was as near a relation as her aunt—nearer, perhaps; but she had seen him so little, he was almost a stranger, and what she had seen of him she disliked. Lady Clayre was worse than a stranger.

Ivy did not deceive herself. She knew that, sincere as was her grief for her loss, the grief was embittered and deepened by the difference in her prospects caused by the codicil. Had she been free to choose her own life, the sorrow would have been all for aunt Anne, but now she mourned for herself. She knew she was going to the most uncongenial home in the world, under the most uncongenial circumstances; dependent, and forced, as it were, on the hospitality of those on whom she had no claim. Again her tears flowed at the thought. She sobbed, poor child, as if her heart would break.

She was so completely absorbed that she heard



no outer noise, but she felt suddenly an arm placed round her kindly, and a kind voice murmured in French—

“Courage, mon enfant!”

She raised herself, and looked up bewildered. Bessie said, apologetically, “I did not find you in the drawing-room, and I came to call you, miss.”

“And I followed and heard my child’s voice here.”

“Dear M. Corsand, how good of you to come!”

“Could I do otherwise? I was fortunately in Paris, and came almost immediately I had your letter. I called this morning, but would not disturb you, and then I returned this evening.”

Ivy pressed his hand. She was not friendless.

“You must come down with me, and then we will talk.” •

She obeyed him. Before he spoke, he put her into the arm-chair. With Bessie’s assistance he made up the fire, and it blazed up and warmed the room. Then he gave some orders, and waited a few minutes. When Bessie returned, she brought some tea and some biscuits, which he insisted Ivy should take before she spoke. It refreshed her; but what refreshed her more was the kindness, the care, the affection. One must have felt as bereaved as Ivy had done half an hour previously, to understand how she felt now.



"Now, Ivy, tell me what you are going to do. Bessie says you are to live at Clayre Court."

"Yes. Is it not dreadful?"

"Humph! Not pleasant. There is no alternative?"

"None. It would be selfish to go to Gerard. I must bear it, I suppose."

"Yes. And remember, a trial borne willingly—accepted—becomes often a blessing."

"I will try to bear it, that is all—I can do no more. I care little what becomes of me. I feel dead in heart and hope."

"There is a deep meaning, you know, Ivy, in the custom sanctioned by all nations and from all ages, that it is a living sacrifice which must be offered to God, or the gods. Nothing dead was ever devoted to that purpose. It is not a dead, inert obedience you must give Him, but the living desire of the heart, which has to be slain to conform to His will—His will, which is always for our good. It is *His* will that you should undergo this. You must not only yield, but yield willingly and cheerfully. It may be better than you think."

"Oh, you do not know Lady Clayre."

"But I know Ivy Clayre; and my opinion of her is so high, that I do not think any amount of persons like Lady Clayre can overcome her. Seed time is past, Ivy; now is the time for har-



vest. You will judge what you have sown by what you reap. You have intelligence, temper, strength. You have the key to all situations. No locks can resist that combination."

"They will break my heart! All I love they hate, all I dislike they value. Oh! M. Corsand, I would have done anything. I would have worked for my bread; I would have toiled night and day."

"My dear child, it is very hard; but revolt makes the yoke heavier to bear. We all say at times we would do anything, bear anything, but this. Let this cup pass! But to submit is to conquer. After all, seven years is not an eternity, and then you will be free to do what you best like. Your aunt was mistaken, but you are sure she did what she thought was best and kindest for you. Let that thought sweeten the bitterness of your feelings. We all thirst for any trials but those allotted to us; and yet, if we sift ourselves and our trials thoroughly, we should find a fitness in them, or they would not be ours."

"Never to see, you, Cordelia . . .!"

"My child, it is folly for human beings to say *never* or *ever*—those are words not for us. Even if you had lived on here, you were separated from Cordelia."

"Yes; but through you I could hear about her."



"You will still do that, for I shall write to you ; or, if that be difficult, I shall take care that you hear from me."

"I saw in the papers that a new singer had appeared in Florence. I fancied it was Cordelia."

"It was."

"It was !" A brightness came to Ivy's eyes.

"Yes, you may rejoice with her, dear Ivy, she has met with a great success."

"I am so glad ! Then she is happy, at all events."

"Yes, she is pleased ; for she has attained by this success an object which was very dear to her. Happy is a different word."

"You know Gerard has gone to Italy to join Norton ?"

"No, I had not heard of it."

"Do you think they will meet ? Gerard and Cordelia, I mean. If they could meet, all would be well, I am sure."

"I fear not."

Ivy sighed deeply.

"Those are the bitterest sorrows, my child ; no outward trials, if our own hearts are not embittered or resentful, can take real hold of us ; but nothing now can soften Cordelia's fate but a frank, generous reconciliation with her husband. I do not even know the cause of the rupture, but when



I saw her at that time, her grief seemed overwhelming and her resentment implacable, but the cause I know not. Be assured there is nothing which is so hard to bear as the hatred and resentment we feel towards others. Theirs towards us, is but a straw in the balance."

"Have you heard from Cordelia lately?"

"Yes; she often writes. All the consolation she can have she will find in her art."

"Does she ever speak of me in her letters?"

"Always, dear Ivy."

"Will you tell her I love her always, and that I look forward to the time when she will let me tell her so myself."

"I must go now, for I must return to-night to Paris. I brought your Susie some good news of her Carlo. He is with Cordelia."

"I thought so from what Susie said." Ivy then told M. Corsand what had happened to Susie.

He sincerely congratulated her; and thus between soothing, encouraging, and exhorting her, he gave her courage and patience.

At last he rose to leave her.

"God bless you, my dear Ivy. Remember, if you are tried really beyond what your best self can bear, write to me, and we will see what can be done. At any rate, I have thought that there is one privation it would be quite useless for you to endure while your old friend lives."



He put a letter in her hand, which Ivy took mechanically, for she thought of nothing at the time but the grief of parting with him, and the comfort that this well-timed visit had been to her.

This time it was M. Corsand who kissed her hand with a deference and tenderness which was inexpressibly sweet to her. Another minute and he was gone. Ivy heard him speak a word or two to the servants down stairs, who had both come up to let him out, and then their enthusiastic thanks, and the door closed.

When Ivy looked at her letter, she found several bank-notes—twenty pounds, in fact—and written on it were these words—“*Pour les pauvres.*” “Dear, dear M. Corsand,” murmured Ivy. And this was the man Gerard hated! Ivy was peculiarly innocent and inexperienced in love matters, but she felt in every fibre of her honest, upright nature, that the jealousy, which she suspected was at the root of Gerard’s hate, was a groundless one. She knew that there was a secret, the knowledge of which was shared between Cordelia and M. Corsand. She deplored it; but it was a sacrilege towards both to suppose that love had any part in it.

As Ivy thought of these things, she remembered the agitation with which Cordelia had once spoken of Princess Bifrons. That name seemed to



exercise the same spell on her as that of Corsand on Gerard. The knot between these four persons seemed inextricable. And Mrs. Vibert? what part had she in it, she who had been the friend of all? Did her dead hand alone hold the clue by which these miserable mysteries could be unravelled.







BOOK V.

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CHAPTER I.

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A VERY short time after her first interview with the lad who had brought her the Princess Bifrons' letter (to Cordelia's great surprise), he returned to Via della Pergola, and asked to see her.

"Signora, I have a letter for you. I am the Carlo named in that letter."

"Give it me, Carlo."

He gave it. It was from M. Corsand. Its purport was to ask her to take Carlo into her service. M. Corsand dwelt upon the kindness it would be to Carlo, who had been sent away from his situation owing to some trifling dispute with the Princess's maggiordomo; and he also told her that as it was necessary for her to have some male attendant to accompany her to and fro the theatre, and that she could afford it, it was a duty to herself, and a charity to Carlo, to engage him.



Had the Princess been conscious that a lad known to M. Corsand had formed part of her establishment, she would have been more interested in his coming and going; but it was not till after he was gone that, missing him, she heard he had left her service, and had gone to be "camerière" to the Signora Corda.

"Did you recommend him?" she asked her maggiordomo.

"No; he had been dismissed, and of course had received no character."

"Then how did he obtain the situation?"

"I cannot tell," said the maggiordomo, who looked as if such persons as Carlo were far beneath his attention; "but I believe he used to boast of having a friend and patron, a Frenchman, like himself,—some scoundrel of a carbonaro, I suppose,—and this may be how he procured his new situation."

"If so," said the Princess, "you must keep your eye on him. In the present state of Italy, such persons are dangerous."

Her servant understood her, and promised to watch Carlo.

Cordelia found him useful. He accompanied her to the theatre, and waited for her till it was over, for she rarely used a carriage. In spite of the really liberal terms of her engagement, Cordelia was as economical as possible. She was sternly



determined to return the 3000*l.*, and every farthing saved on her personal expenses was something towards it.

Of the Princess she had seen nothing personally. She had made no further attempt to see Cordelia after her letter had been returned to her. She occasionally sent for Liesa to sing at her concerts, and sometimes, but very rarely, came to see her. And so the time passed, and the carnival was going on.

Mrs. Watson had left Florence, and had consigned Norton to the care of the lady recommended by the Princess.

Poor Norton rejoiced in the greater freedom; but Mrs. Beecham had had orders from Mrs. Watson to write to her once a fortnight and tell her how her nephew was. How much spying Mrs. Beecham contrived to combine with this species of guardianship, time will show.

Norton had very innocently used the right talisman by which to gain admittance to Cordelia. She would not have acknowledged it to herself, but those last words of his—"I have something to tell you about Gerard"—had melted her resolve. Cordelia often acted on the impulse of the moment, and it was too often one she afterwards regretted. The affectionate, yearning heart, sometimes won in the race with the resentful, passionate temper.



There were two characters in Cordelia. There are, in fact, two characters in all of us ; but in some their dual natures stand out in sharper contrast than in others. It requires much experience or severe discipline to use them ; when they are fused into one harmonious whole, then the human being is mature, and has attained its full development. Some never reach this fulfilment, but remain inconsistent and one-sided to the end.

This had been one of her relenting moments. After the silence of so many months, the impulse to hear something about Gerard had been too strong to be controlled.

Cordelia lectured herself for her weakness and inconsistency the next moment, but it was too late. She thought she would write and release herself from her promise to Norton. She did so, but she had not inquired his address. To send her note *poste restante* would be a risk. He was coming some morning, but she did not know precisely the day he would come.

She even hesitated whether she should not deny herself, but that would have been so unfair to poor Norton, that she could not bring herself to do it. She made a compromise by promising to herself she would not lead to the subject, and if he commenced it, would change it as soon as possible.



She was sitting reading when Norton was announced. He felt very shy as he entered the presence of his idol. She looked more lovely than ever, and her smile was so frank and kind that he was enchanted.

"You are the first person that has broken on my entire solitude," she said; "and had you not absolutely caught me out, I think I should have kept my rule of seclusion and exclusion inviolable still."

"I recognised you immediately," stammered Norton.

"Were you with Mrs. Watson?"

"Yes."

"Did she recognise me also?"

"No, she thought you were like Miss Ashton; but that you looked older and taller."

"So much for my regal dress. I am going to ask you a favour."

"Anything I can do: how very glad I am."

"It is only this: do not mention to any one that you knew me under the name of Ashton. I have taken another name for many reasons. All my friends have a great prejudice against the stage, and it would lead to endless trouble if it was found out by them that it is my profession. Will you keep my secret?"

"I promise you not to speak of you to anyone. Will that do?"



"Yes, that will do ; but I must say one thing more, Mr. Clayre. My time is so occupied with rehearsals or study at home, that I cannot see you often."

"But you *will* let me come sometimes?" feverishly interrupted Norton.

Cordelia paused. He looked paler, more delicate than when she had seen him before. There were two red spots on his cheek, which spoke of internal fever. He was wasted, and there was altogether an air of illness and desolation about him which rendered a refusal hard. Some of this illness and suffering she knew she had caused. Cordelia felt remorseful and tenderly compassionate as she looked upon him. She thought herself so much older than Norton, that it seemed absurd to look upon him as a lover.

"You can come sometimes. But you seem far from well. Have you been ill since I last saw you?"

"Not ill, but I have been weak. I always am so. I was never well except that time at St. Gervais. I shall be well again now. Do not be afraid I shall be troublesome. I am quite happy in knowing you are here, and that you will admit me occasionally. Besides, I shall see you at the Pergola every time you sing."

Cordelia blushed. There was no mistaking such language ; but there was a childlike abandon-



ment to his feelings in the way he spoke, which placed poor Norton on a level different from that where she could have checked another man.

"Do you remain long at Florence?" she asked.

"Yes, all the winter, I think. In May, or thereabouts, I shall return to England. I am of age next month."

"Indeed!"

"Sir Arthur must leave me to myself then."

"Do you like Florence?"

"Yes; there are some very good-natured persons here, and it is such a small place that one knows everyone."

"Do you ride?"

"Yes, sometimes. Do you?"

"No. I have no time for anything but study and working at my voice. I sometimes walk out, but I have not a moment I can properly call my own. I have not been to the Galleries more than once."

"I have been several times. Do you know I think the Giuditta is so like you!"

"Like *me*!"

"Yes, if you had that coloured hair and eyes. It is the same kind of face. One never forgets it; and one sees traces of it in other faces in the Gallery, and one finds oneself thinking of it at home, and fancying it with a different expression every time. When I wrote to Gerard from St.



Gervais, I described you by your likeness to that picture. We have a copy of it at the court. Poor fellow; I wrote to him thinking he was in India. I wonder if they will send the letter back? I little thought then how soon his time in India would end."

"What is the matter?"

"That was what I wanted to tell you, but I have not been able to think of anything since I entered the room. He is in England."

"England!"

"Yes; he was sent home some months ago mortally wounded, it was thought. What is the matter?"

"Nothing—go on."

She had risen and leant against the table.

"They brought him from Southampton to London, where he has been for a twelvemonth; and when Sir Arthur wrote last, he mentioned he was still dangerously ill in Aunt Anne's house; but Sir Arthur thought he would get over it."

"When did you hear?"

"About a fortnight ago. He has got over the wound, but they are afraid he will fall into a decline. Sometimes he is better, sometimes worse."

"Could you show me the letter?"

"No. I am sorry to say I tore it up. Why?"

"Have you written since?"



“No;—shall I?”

Cordelia could bear it no longer: she faintly bowed her head, and with a gesture of apology left the room.

Mortally wounded—dangerously ill—dying—perhaps dead! It was all over, then. No more anxiety, no more resentment, no more struggle. The husband and wife would meet no more. It is very ghastly to think of one who has wronged us, as dead. That one fact blots out so much.

Three months' passionate love (how sincere and devoted on Cordelia's side!), then this death in life separation, and then the end of all.

What an aimless thing human life was, after all, if it all finished thus. A wrong, and no atonement. Cordelia rapidly went over all in her own mind. Was it just possible that there might have been some attenuating circumstance which she had been ignorant of? At any rate, would it have been a comfort to him to have obtained her forgiveness on his death-bed? She started up—that picture was too appalling. Oh! if she could see him once more, only once!

She returned to the drawing-room, and found Norton seated patiently waiting for her.

She commanded herself sufficiently to apologise for her absence, and then almost timidly added:

“I should like to know how your cousin is. I knew——. Never mind why,” she said.



Norton was the least suspicious of mortals. "I will write to-day," he said, and in a fortnight I will bring you the answer."

"As soon as you hear anything you can come."

He took leave of her. When he left, Cordelia sat for two hours motionless, with her head on her hand. A fortnight was a long time, but there was no help for it. She could have written to Ivy herself, but this was not the time to claim her sisterhood. Gerard had Ivy, and Ivy would compensate to her brother for the absence of his wife. Had he never married, he might never have been sent to that fatal country, and Ivy might never have had to mourn her brother. That marriage had been the curse of all connected with it; her own family—Gerard—but the tie might already be broken.

She was surprised M. Corsand had never written, but probably he would not dispirit her when he knew she was out of reach of hearing more than the fact.

Although she might that very day be a widow, she was going to act and sing, and receive applause, and be crowned as usual. What connection was there between this brilliant page and the one which was being torn up in that dull house in London? For months he had been ill, and she had been ignorant of it. She remembered the first embrace, the first passionate



rapture of love avowed and reciprocated, and the appeal to eternity which had been its fitting sequel. In all eternity they would now endure the pang of a broken vow. "For better and for worse;"—husband and wife had both shrunk from that last consequence.

How often had M. Corsand advised her, ere it had been irrevocable, not to make the rupture she had persisted in doing! *He* had been wronged, by her father; but he had sought no revenge. M. Corsand was one of those who would not admit of an enemy. He might be injured, but no man living could say, speaking of him, "We are enemies." He might say, "I have wronged him, I hate him, I am his foe;" but Maurice Corsand stood on a height from whence he acknowledged no enemies.

Cordelia would have given all that yet remained to her of life to have stood by Gerard's side one minute, and to have said, "I forgive—let me too be forgiven." But it was in vain. Perhaps at that very moment he was bearing witness against her in heaven, not of his own falsehood towards her, but of her unforgiving anger against him.

The bells sounding the Ave Maria recalled her to herself and the present. The servant came in with lights. It was time to dress.

There were some tones in her singing that



night which had never been heard before. Tones which came from an aching heart, and pierced to many a heart which recognised the Shibboleth of sorrow. When once surrendered to the force of her part, she was as if inspired. The passion and agitation of her soul found a vent. There was a scope given to feelings which would have well-nigh suffocated her had not they found expression.

There are natures which require this "vent," which need the large utterance of art in moments of intense feeling. Those whose tragedies are endured in quiet drawing-rooms, with a crochet-needle in their hands, and their feet on a foot-stool, scarcely understand the kind of necessity which impels others to seek some outlet for emotion; but it is not the less true.

"*La Corda e divina sta sera,*" muttered some of the orchestra as they watched her.

The curtain fell with more vociferous applause than usual, but all that Cordelia could distinguish as she was led on breathless and exhausted by the manager, were the gleaming eyes and pale cheeks of Norton Clayre, and even while she looked they seemed to change into the features of Gerard—paler and more wasted still.



## CHAPTER II.

AFTER a sleepless night, Cordelia rose for her early morning walk, calmer, but not less unhappy than the previous night. It is a sad truth, that long after people have lost the power of making us happy, they retain that of making us miserable, — unconsciously to themselves, too. The sea knows not how its voice still echoes in the shell which it has cast far, far inland. Cordelia put on her bonnet and thick veil, and bent her steps towards the Porta Romana, with the intention of reaching Poggio Imperiale. That grand mournful avenue was a fit place for her meditations.

In the midst of that smiling landscape, with its transparent skies, garden-like cultivation, and opaline mountains reflecting every hue of the morning splendour, this dark line has a wonderful effect. In so many of our lives there is the same collateral and surrounding happiness ; but, alas ! an often-trod highway of sadness breaks through it. Cordelia felt that in her fate there would be always, in spite of the success which



she knew she should achieve, a line of cypresses. She walked up and down, scarcely sensible of the wonderful beauty of Florence, which, "bathed in waves of translucent air," lay beneath her—lost in thought, and feeling that the twists and entanglements of life seemed more complicated than ever.

As she retraced her steps she passed through one of the narrow streets leading towards the Via della Pergola, and stopped for a moment where a whole crowd of the Misericordia brethren, with their litter, stopped up the path. All English readers know the strange effect of this procession amid the noise and glare of streets by day, or its mysterious pathos met at night, from the pages of that simple, sweet story, "La Beata." They were waiting with their litter before a house. Presently a young man was borne down the stairs and placed in it. A woman, with her child at her breast, stood by with tearful eyes. He was evidently insensible from pain, and saw nothing. The black curtains of the litter fell round him, and he was carried off. The woman strained her eyes after him, and a heavy shadow was on her face as she turned into the house.

"They quarrelled like cat and dog, but she feels repentant now," said one of the bystanders.

"Yes, it is hard to have both remorse and



grief to bear. She is sorry because she knows she will never see him again; and she is sorry because she has never loved him, or been of any consolation to him."

They went home, and the words sunk in Cordelia's heart. But she *had* loved him, and there was a triple grief to bear in her case.

If we only knew what a heavy penalty we ourselves pay for our relentless animosities—how we hurt ourselves in our vain efforts to harden our hearts—we should abstain. There is nothing harder to bear than an unforgiven wrong; forgive it and it has no longer any bitterness.

One of the great services which Art renders its votaries is to draw the imagination away from self-contemplation. The sword is no longer stuck in the flesh, it is sheathed in a fitting scabbard. The diligent study, the unceasing perseverance, the profound contemplation of the last few months, had wonderfully strengthened and purified Cordelia's nature. The higher her intellectual aspirations were, the nobler her moral nature became. But she had still to learn how to forgive.

Prejudices against the stage as a profession are wearing out fast; in a few years more the power of the old reproach will be forgotten. People who read women's books, their autobiographies, their novels, their poems, in which so much of



the inner life is chronicled, cannot find fault with the publicity; and those who have known the stainless character and innocent lives of some of the most world-renowned of stage heroines, can no longer shudder at the temptations of the profession.

Whatever slays the Self, which is always struggling within us for dominion, redeems. If it be Art, let us not grudge the palm to Art, and Art can only be duly worshipped by self-sacrifice. Whoever in Art place themselves first, may attain cleverness, but never genius. Through all human aim runs the eternally antagonistic dualism, faith and works: but the true faith alone brings forth the true works. Works done to glorify, to manifest, to save Self alone, are like tinkling cymbals, and even in the art which seems to need the greatest self-assertion, scenic representation, this is no less a truth. *Savoir faire* does not make a great Artist, any more than lip service a saint. If we would wish our souls to be a fitting medium for divine influences, we must, above all, keep them transparent. The least stain of self is a cloud, and the receptive property is marred. Simplicity, self-devotion, disinterested and earnest perseverance, are all qualities called out by the discipline of Art; and what character is not moulded to a fairer form by such discipline?

This was why M. Corsand had so encouraged



and urged Cordelia in her younger days to enter the priesthood of art. He felt she was worthy to do so, and yet more, he felt that some of the best tones of her character would not be called out unless she became an artist. There would be limitations, unless the full octave could be struck.

M. Corsand's philosophy was this. He considered the one task God had given to every human being in this world was the formation of his own character, with the materials and under the circumstances which were bestowed on him. All Art was a means to the education of the soul. All trials, all successes, all happiness, all sorrow, tended to, and ought to culminate in, that self-discipline and self-development.

The more Cordelia thought of Norton's news, the more she was grieved. That sudden blow had been like the voice which had bid the buried Lazarus arise. The love interred, shrouded, which had passed into the realm of nothingness, rose and confronted her in its grave-clothes with the terrible feature of death and the worm on its wasted presentment—but living. Yet she could do nothing. She could not write, she could not go herself, she was as cut off from him as if *she* were dead. She reaped exactly what she had sowed.

She sat leaning her head on her hand, when



suddenly the door opened and Norton Clayre entered. He looked more ill than on the previous day, but there was great excitement in his manner.

"Have you heard?" she said, and she rose to meet him impetuously.

"Heard!"

"From Ge——. I mean your cousin."

"No."

"I thought you were not to come till you had heard." How cruel was Cordelia's voice, she was so disappointed.

"I know it," said he, humbly; "but I could not help it. Forgive me, but I do not know what has driven me to this, except that last night you looked and sang in a way that has turned my brain, I think; but I have not been myself. I have come to tell you—do not speak, I know how unworthy I am—but let me love you." He pulled her dress like an unfortunate child, and held it fast.

"Good God!" The revulsion of this unexpected declaration was too much. Cordelia cried unrestrainedly and passionately. When she looked up, Norton was at her feet, but his whole look was one of unutterable grief, mixed with a physical shock which seemed to have paralysed him.

"Pray rise; I am weak, foolish, living alone



makes me nervous. I must have acted very wrongly for this to happen." She made him get up and sit on a chair, and brought him a glass of water. She was terrified to see, as he drew his handkerchief before his lips, that there were streaks of blood on it.

"Never mind," he said in a faint voice, "it is often like that—it is of no consequence. But tell me why I have so shocked and wounded you."

He trembled violently, and Cordelia felt that she must command herself if she wished to soothe and sustain him.

"It is my own fault, Mr. Clay, and I was shocked to think how ill I had behaved."

"Ill?"

"Yes, ill; after what you said at St. Gervais, I should have avoided you altogether."

"Tell me, what have you done?"

Poor Cordelia could not restrain her tears.

"I am a very unhappy woman."

"If love could make you happy, you should be so no longer. Hear me: I am a boy, I have no health, no intellect like yours, but I worship you. I have never had anyone else but Gerard to love, and that is different. I should be your slave. I know it is impossible for you to love me—you are married; even if you were not, you could not love *me*, but let me love *you*. I am quite alone. Aunt Watson has left, there is no one to inter-



fere with me now. All I ask is to let me come and see you, to let me tell you sometimes how I adore you."

"Forgive *me*, for I have done you a great wrong. Heaven knows it was most unconsciously, but I ought to have known better. I ought not to have allowed you to come."

"No, no, do not say that."

There was a silence, during which Norton had covered his face with his hands.

"I am a very unhappy woman. I am separated from my husband, and——"

"Where is ~~he~~?" asked Norton, in a voice so low that she could scarcely hear him.

"In England; but I shall never, I think, see him again."

As Cordelia said the word "never," her whole frame shook with fear. It was a prophecy that she felt she uttered.

"Will you forgive me?" she said; "I ought to have spared you this pain."

There was such exquisite sweetness in her manner and voice, that poor Norton groaned with ineffable despair.

"LET me come to see you?" He reiterated this as a child.

"All I can say is, do not think hardly of me. The most urgent reasons required this secrecy, or I should not have deceived you at St. Gervais."



"But you will let me come sometimes?"

"Will you shake hands with me before you go? and, as I said before, think as kindly of me as you can."

Cordelia wished to be firm.

This was a catastrophe poor Norton had not contemplated. "Do you mean to say that I must never see you again?"

Cordelia made a gesture to say it was necessary.

"Miss Ashton—I *must* call you so—that is impossible. It is my fault to have spoken as I did. Forget it. I was always a fool—married or unmarried it would have been the same—how could *you* love *me*? I am not worse off than I should have been. At any rate do not forsake me, do not punish me for my folly. I promise you, on the word of a gentleman (the slight figure rose with a boyish dignity at these words), that I will be silent henceforth; but, remember, I am very lonely, very unhappy; that if you forsake me I am entirely abandoned. It seems like whining to claim your pity, but if I leave Florence now, which I must if you will not see me again, I should have to return to Sir Arthur. To be in that house again would kill me. Can you not forgive me?—will you treat me as a brother, who assures you that he will never transgress again."



Norton spoke with all his heart. Words, gestures, looks, all spoke the same imploring language. Cordelia was touched. He looked so ill; it was true that he was so lonely.

"I will be your friend," she said, "and the first duty of your friend is to tell you to go home now. You must rest. You can come, if you like, another day."



CHAPTER III.

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CORDELIA did not regret, this time, her kind impulse.

Norton's youth—he was nearly four years younger than herself—his extreme delicacy, and the tutelage in which his mind had been kept, all contributed to make an appeal to her womanly pity, and to take away from her thoughts the idea of any other affection towards him than a fraternal one. To continue an intimacy with a rejected lover, is a trying ordeal. It requires the most generous organisation in a man, the most delicate forbearance in a woman, and even then, it is only the most exceptional circumstances that can make it endurable. Cordelia imagined that such had been the peculiar privations of Norton's life, that he had mistaken the glad feelings excited by this, the first kind and pleasant intercourse with a woman which he had ever experienced, for love. She thought, that once convinced, how impossible anything but a sisterly relation could be between them, he would understand his own feelings better and



be contented with what she could award him. There was a strong inclination on her part to be fond of him—in an elder sister, maternal kind of way. Women are so easily attracted towards those who suffer. Their compassion is an active, not passive, principle, as in men. They always try to make up for the injustice of fate. They seem to think that God has deputed to them the task of giving compensation.

That line of eyebrow, so like Gerard's, that short upper lip, that hair of the same bright colour, though not in wavy masses like his, were of course not counted by Cordelia in the enumeration of the reasons which made her seek to be kind to Norton.

Like many women she hoped what she wished ; but like few, she utterly undervalued her own power. It had so signally failed in one instance, and that one, the most important of her life, that she had no belief that any love she could inspire could be either deep or lasting. The love which she had once held in her grasp, was like a fairy jewel, it had changed into a pebble as she clasped it. What could this lad, so unformed, so deficient, so under the usual mark of humanity, feel for her, but a whim which would soon die a natural death ? Poor Norton, the woman of genius was in this instance short-sighted and imperceptive. All the infirmities of Norton's mental condition had not



prevented his loving, and his love had given him speech, sight, feeling. On all other subjects he was unchanged, but his love for Cordelia was in itself, as entire, as profound, as fiery a passion as ever "informed a frail tenement of clay." Perhaps, his very want of mental development gave him additional tenacity in his love. Here he was free and no longer in bondage. He claimed his birth-right of manhood in the power of loving, if in nothing else.

The contrast of "*le feu brulant, et l'affectueuse bienveillance*," was never more clearly shown. His cheeks would alternately flush and turn livid at the sound of her voice, at the touch of her hand. He would sit night after night in a box which he had hired at the Pergola, and watch her as if the whole of his existence was in his eyes. He would pass sleepless nights till every note she sang echoed in his brain, every movement photographed on his recollection by the retentiveness of a loving heart.

But he kept his word. He learned to call her *La Signora Corda* ; and he never spoke to her but in the calm tone of an ordinary friend.

His aunt had been anxious to take him with her when she left, but he had refused, and she had no authority over him. She contented herself, for she was a woman of a certain goodness of feeling, to inquire for a family with whom she



could place him. Here the Princess Bifrons, with whom she had a slight acquaintance, was of use to her. His health was too frail for him to be left to run the chances of an ordinary hotel, or lodging, life.

The Princess had recommended to Mrs. Watson the family of an Englishman who had formerly lived in Florence. The Englishman was dead, but the widow and daughters still remained. He had been married twice, each time to Italians. The last wife had become a Protestant, and this conversion and the desertion which had then ensued of her own family, had made it a feeling of *esprit de corps* for all the English in Florence to uphold her. She was visited by them and visited in her turn, and all kinds of ways were devised to help her, her step-daughter, and her own children, for her means were extremely small. Mrs. Watson thought it would be a good thing for both to ask her to receive her nephew, and went to her, introduced by the Princess. Mrs. Beecham consented with delight. It was lucrative. There was no trouble, and there were potentialities. Mrs. Beecham, as regarded her own interests was Argus-eyed.

The bargain was concluded, and Norton was duly installed in two rooms—sitting-room and bedroom behind it, on a first-floor in Via Maggio. His servant slept in a room above, and waited



on him. He was to dine with the family. His servant brought him his breakfast, but the providing him with these necessities was the care of Mrs. Beecham. She called this receiving him into the bosom of her family.

For several days after his last interview, with his idol, the bitter tramontana that sometimes makes Florence the coldest city in the world, had prevented Norton from going out. He had not seen Cordelia, therefore, at her own house or at the theatre, for ten days, and the depression he felt was terrible. His desire to see her was a thirst which nothing could assuage. He felt literally that death was preferable to such an exile, and that any harm he could do himself by going to see her and braving the inclemency of the weather, would be more than compensated by the vivifying effect of her presence. He wrapped his plaid round him and went down. At the door he met Mrs. Beecham.

"Are you going out?" she said, with surprise.

"Yes."

"You are very imprudent, my dear Mr. Clayre, with your delicate chest. Can you not send for anything you want? Your servant surely could go out instead of you."

Mrs. Beecham spoke English with extreme fluency, though with a strong accent.

"I do not want anything. I—"



"But you cannot walk for pleasure such a day as this, and you have been so ill, too."

Poor Norton could not stand there arguing the point. He ascended the stairs and again sat down in despair. Besides his own wish of seeing Cordelia, he had had a letter from Gerard, to whom he had written as soon as he had heard of his illness, and this he wanted to show to Cordelia.

While he sat coaxing his wood fire to burn, the thought passed through his mind that he would write to Cordelia, and tell her he had received a letter. He was just doing this when there was a knock at the door, and his servant told him there was a lady below who wished to see him.

Does a strong desire act so directly? To what magnetism is it to be attributed, that we so often experience a similar sudden fulfilment of an intense hope? Let table-turning be true or false, let spirit-rapping be credulity and fraud; yet how explain, how define, these fulfilled presentiments, these abrupt coincidences between our thought and external circumstance?

Norton felt sure it was Cordelia. He told the servant to admit the lady.

"Favorisca, Signora."

In a moment Cordelia, rosy with the cold air, eager, anxious, and impatient, entered.

Cordelia had waited and waited in the hope of



seeing or hearing from him (for she longed with an intense and fearful longing to hear about Gerard), till she could bear it no longer, and resolved to go to inquire herself. She could not write the question she yet yearned to have answered. Imprudent Cordelia !

"I have found you out," she said, and paused. She could get no further.

"I was going to send to you. I have had a letter from Gerard, I wished to show you. How kind of you to come ! I was too ill to go out."

"Too ill ; what has been the matter ?"

"Oh, a cold and cough—nothing else ; but my doctor would not let me stir."

Cordelia had heard that morning, that the Signorino Inglese who lived in Via Maggio, was very ill. Liesa had told her that the Princess Bifrons who knew his aunt well, went to see him nearly every day. His aunt had entreated the Princess to see him occasionally, for he was quite alone. He was not well when he came, but now there was little hope of his life. This explained his absence to Cordelia, but in a way which grieved her much.

After some hesitation, she determined to go herself and enquire how he was.

It was an imprudent step to take, but, Cordelia was rash and impulsive always. Her



anxiety about her husband magnified the necessity of going to see Norton, and the double motive conquered all other fears. All she took care to prevent, by a careful inquiry, was the possibility of meeting the Princess there.

He placed her in the arm-chair and gave her the letter.

She threw back her veil and unfastened her cloak. The letter was very brief, and she could see how shaky and weak the hand was. The writing was blurred and unequal.

"Thank you, dear old fellow, for the lines you sent me. I have crawled back to life again, but I am good for nothing. I do not think I shall ever have the poor satisfaction of being thought worthy to give up my life for my country. What remains of the wreck is, however, glad to hear from you. Get strong and well, Norton; and above all things never care for a woman.

G. C.

"Gerard is very unhappy," said Norton.

Cordelia's lips curled, but her face was now pale as usual.

"I am glad he is better; but now, Norton, tell me about yourself?"

"I am quite well now,"—he felt so.

"You look thinner, I think. I am very glad I



came to save you from committing such an imprudence as going out this weather. There is a steely point in the cold of Florence that cuts to one's heart. It is not a heavy cold which crushes you, but it pierces you. It would have done you serious harm. You must not go out again till you are quite well: promise me, or I shall be anxious."

"I hope I shall be quite well to-morrow. This is the last week but one of the Carnival, and I have promised Mrs. Beecham to take her to the Opera the night of the Veglione."

"True; I had forgotten it was so near the end of the Carnival."

At this moment the door opened, after a knock which neither had heard, and a lady entered the room. She was very small, and very fair. There was an evident desire on her part to make the least of her personal advantages, and yet somehow she added to them. Her hair was quite flatly bound round her head, and, as it was the fashion to wear it, swelled out shell-fashion on each side, the tight coils in which that mass of raven hair was folded made the small head look distinguished and elegant. Her face was very quiet, unless when she looked up suddenly, and then her eyes, of the palest and most limpid grey, seemed to emit a flame. She looked as if some simoom had passed over her, and had scorched



her into a white heat, for cheeks, brow, lips, throat, were of a dead waxen white.

"My mother sent me to ask you if you wanted anything out. I am going out." She spoke English in a slow, stiff way, as if unaccustomed to it.

"But Mrs. Beecham said it was too cold for any one to go out."

"I am going out," she repeated. "Can I do anything for you?"

"No, thank you."

"It is so very cold," said Cordelia, kindly. "I have a carriage at the door; can I help you, or take you anywhere?"

"You are very kind!"

"Do let me; thank you, Norton," she said, as he opened the door for them; "now that I have found my way, I will come again, unless you are soon better. I have brought you a book, which may amuse you." She shook hands with him, and then accompanied her invited companion down stairs.

"Where shall I drop you?"

"At the Santissima Annunziata."

"I am very glad I saved you such a long walk."

"It is long, and yet I take it every day at this hour."

"You go to vespers?"



"No. I meet some friends."

Cordelia said no more, for fear of being indiscreet. As she looked out of the window, some of the masks, who at that hour during the last fortnight of the Carnival are allowed to go about the streets, passed the carriage with their peculiar noise.

"It is wonderful to me," said Cordelia, "how these Italians can still occupy themselves with such childish follies,—a people who have their freedom to work out."

"*These* Italians," said the lady, with an accent which made Cordelia blush, "are not so childish as you think. Their mask has a double purpose,—*viso sciolto pensieri stretti*—a little less abandon in this amusement would excite attention. That must be avoided, even at the risk of being misunderstood."

"I beg your pardon."

"It is nothing; you English are so apt, and, perhaps, naturally so, to despise all approaches to freedom but your own. Remember how different are our antecedents, our present circumstances, and above all, our national character, from yours. No judgment can be possible until the end. But here we are, thank you, again."

The fiacre stopped, and the lady sprang out. Cordelia had not the presence of mind to ask her to come and see her, but she felt very much



interested in her, and resolved the very first time she saw Norton again, to question him about her.

She had been accustomed to think of Italian women especially, as women who took no interest in the questions of the day; as frivolous, half-educated, without taste, and with no principle. But this young lady, for she looked very young, had, at all events, serious interests at heart.

In a few minutes she reached home, and all other subjects of thought faded before the deep thankfulness that was hers, on finding her husband was convalescent. But so inconsistent are we all in our worst as well as best moods: though Cordelia was profoundly thankful she was not so softened towards him as she had been. The tone of his letter to Norton had irritated her.

"Do you know, my dear Mabel," said Mrs. Beecham, on her daughter's return, "I think it would be right to mention to Mrs. Watson that her nephew seems to have a liaison, or what you will, with a very beautiful woman. I caught a glimpse of her face as she told the coachman where to drive. She is lovely."

"And most intelligent and well educated."

"I made an excuse to see how he was after you left. I never saw anyone so changed in a few minutes. He looked transfigured."



“He may look as he likes. She treated him as a relation—a brother. Dear mother, do not interfere.” There was a deep meaning in this request, but Mrs. Beecham only shrugged her shoulders, and was silent.



CHAPTER IV.

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NORTON passed a feverish night, and was so far from well the next day that he could not rise. Cordelia sent Carlo to know how he was, and was grieved to hear this. She resolved to go herself to see how he was in the afternoon. It was marvellous to herself how fond she was getting of Norton. She did so. He had managed to crawl out of bed and to dress, and was sitting shivering by the fire when she entered. She was shocked to see how ill he looked. The compassion she felt gave indescribable softness to her manner. It was so sad to see one so young, and needing so much care, so lonely. The heir to a fine property, the inheritor of a proud name, but totally neglected and forsaken.

She was as tender to him as a sister. She cooled his feverish forehead. She warmed his cold hands, and he revived under her care as a plant in the sun. It was happiness only to see her; but oh! what heaped up excitement and bliss, seeing her in his own room occupied with his comfort, and ministering to it. It was a sweet poison.



While she sat thus talking to him, Mrs. Beecham made her appearance, ostensibly to make inquiries about her inmate, but really to have the opportunity of looking at his visitor. Not being in the habit of attending the Opera, she did not recognise the beautiful face on which she looked, but it was more beautiful than she had even imagined. She was astonished, and, leaping to conclusions with feminine impetuosity, could attribute this interest in Norton, but to one cause. To her vulgar mind, but one feeling could exist between men and women, — love or interest. She was not astonished at the adoration in Norton's eyes, but she *was* surprised that a young woman of so distinguished appearance should be his visitor, and attributed the visit to anything but disinterested benevolence. She resolved to speak to the Princess, and to write to Mrs. Watson.

"Will you not let me send you something light for your dinner?" she asked Norton; "perhaps you would like it up here? Do you not think he had better not change the atmosphere of his room?" she asked with great politeness of Cordelia.

"I do not want anything," said Norton, impatient of her scrutiny, and fearing it would lead, as it did, to Cordelia's leaving him.

But Mrs. Beecham was resolved upon ascer-



taining as far as she could what she suspected, and maintained her ground.

She asked several questions, hastily answered by Norton, who looked most discomfited as he saw Cordelia resume her wrappings, and after a kind nod to him, and a cold bow to Mrs. Beecham, took her leave.

"What a very beautiful person," said Mrs. Beecham.

A dead silence on Norton's part.

"A friend of Mrs. Watson's, I suppose?"

"My aunt knows her," said Norton, stiffly.

"A married lady?"

He would not speak.

"It is extraordinary that so beautiful a person should go out alone; but the English have such frank, independent ways. I brought up my daughters in the same manner, according to their poor father's wish. In Florence, you know, among Italians, it is an unusual thing for young women to go out alone. Even married women rarely do so. She is, I suppose, a relative of yours?"

"Norton coughed, and looked listless and reserved. He held in his hand a small bunch of violets which Cordelia had left, and was looking at them and holding them as a miser might look at some unexpected increase to his store.

"Shall I put those flowers in water?"



"Thank you, I will not give you the trouble. They are almost dead."

He rose, and, going to the table, unlocked his desk, and placed the violets in it.

Mrs. Beecham smiled a superior smile. Poor young man! How very young he was! But at any rate she was satisfied. A kind of loyalty to Mrs. Watson, who had on parting somewhat confided Norton to her care as very delicate in health, and scarcely fitted to take care of himself, impelled her with the desire to inform her of this fact. A little also of revenge blended with this loyalty, for Norton, guarded by this invincible *Ægis* of a deep love, had kept Mrs. Beecham and her encroachments at a distance by his absent, pre-occupied manner, and had been quite impervious to the charms of Miss Beecham, who had been repeatedly sent up to him with messages, and offers of service by her mother.

Mrs. Beecham knew her own daughter well enough to feel convinced that she would never lend herself in the remotest manner to her plans. Nevertheless, she persevered in them.

Mabel Beecham's whole thoughts were occupied on one subject, her whole feelings were engrossed in one memory, her entire being absorbed in the anticipation of one future. Had every glory on earth been laid at her feet she would have spurned them all, if the deliverance



of her own Tuscany had not been included in the boon. Her heart answered but to one cry, "Fuori lo straniero"—"Viva l'Italia." All her mother's petty intrigues and miserable contrivances were disdained by her with a disdain the more invincible that it was so quiet and dutiful. To her mother, or rather step-mother, she owed the misfortune that had ruined her life, and she was as dead to all the purposes for which this mother still toiled, with the idea that her daughter's consummate beauty might yet open for her the entrance to fortune and position, as if she had already passed the veil between this life and the next. It was a passive resistance, such as a corpse might make.

But Mrs. Beecham was clever enough to know that though her daughter was no active partisan, to many persons her indifference, her reserve, her pre-occupation, were a charm superior to the vain display of other women. With the profound cynicism of a very heartless and somewhat corrupt woman, she shrugged her shoulders at her daughter's fidelity to the dead, and at her devotion to an abstract cause. "Queste ragazze!" she would exclaim to her own confidants, "especially if they have been spoiled by foreign notions, are incomprehensible; but after all, a little experience, and the natural



workings of the heart in our sex, will teach them better."

When Mrs. Beecham left Norton, she wrote a cautious, but somewhat alarming letter to Mrs. Watson. Mr. Clayre had a liaison, and she added that the lady was unknown to her, but that Mr. Clayre had said that Mrs. Watson knew her. The letter was a great alarm to Mrs. Watson. She never doubted but that the dangerous Miss Ashton, *alias* Signora Corda, had again appeared on the scenes. A little self-reproach sharpened her fears. She had allowed her nephew to see too much of her governess when at St. Gervais, and she had not left him sufficiently guarded at Florence. True, Miss Ashton was married, but her husband might be a myth—she might be a divorced wife; at any rate, married or not married, the acquaintance was fraught with danger to Norton. She did not say a word to any one, but sat down and wrote to Sir Arthur the letter which had frightened Sir Arthur into sending Gerard to look after Norton. With a mass of contradictory inuendos, she reverted to this same person having been at St. Gervais, and having already when there, commenced her attacks upon Norton. She also wrote to the Princess, and asked her to observe and to write her report also. Poor Cordelia!



When Cordelia descended the stairs after leaving Norton, she found to her astonishment Carlo in deep conversation with Mabel Beecham. Miss Beecham was going out, and though she did not hurry on seeing Cordelia, she stopped her conversation, bowed gravely, and went out.

"Do you know that lady?" asked Cordelia.

"Si, Signora."

Cordelia was greatly surprised at the brevity of this answer. Usually Carlo was most loquacious with her. She guessed that the young lady and Carlo were known to each other through the agency of that common partisanship of a common cause which unites greater disparities.

Cordelia was interested. "I should like to know her," she said to herself, and resolved the next time she went to see Norton to make some steps towards the acquaintance.

A sudden change in the weather was beneficial to the invalid. He went out again, and Mrs. Beecham was at no loss to guess where he went.

During one of his visits Cordelia made inquiries of Norton about his landlady's daughter. He knew nothing whatever about her beyond the fact that she sometimes brought him messages from her mother. Norton had no eyes for her or for any one else.



One day, about a week afterwards, as Cordelia came through the Borgo San Lorenzo, she met Miss Beecham, who was walking towards her. Cordelia bowed, and stopped her. She asked after Norton, and then added :

"I am very much engaged professionally, but I should be very glad to see you, if you would sometimes call on me in the morning. Will you?"

Miss Beecham said she would. "I will accompany you home now," she said, "if you will permit me. I have business in that direction."

They walked on. At first the conversation was formal and superficial, but soon after feeling the ground as it were, each woman discovered the originality and power of the other, and their topics became more intimate and interesting. Miss Beecham especially, for Cordelia was the listener rather than the speaker.

Miss Beecham asked her if she had read some of the pamphlets that were now, in 1859, being published daily, and in numbers.

The revolution in Tuscany was certainly wrought with the pen. The concentration of the ideas that had been floating about since '48 into spirited, incisive, exciting narratives or arguments, was an intellectual triumph. The fruit was so ripe, that it required but a touch to



break it from the tree ; but the sun that had so matured it was the growing intelligence of the people of Tuscany. With this ripeness there was the force, which the union of all collateral desires into one steadfast aim always gives. Let all merit be given to the great man who staked his all on the predominance of that idea. He knew that it and it only was vast enough to absorb all small divisions, and lofty enough to stand out as a banner which all might look up to. Unity instead of union !

Cordelia was more and more impressed by her companion. It is so rarely a woman lives entirely out of herself in some great intellectual idea. Ivy did, but her work was benevolence, and the heart as well as the head had there full scope ; but with Miss Beecham evidently all personal desires were over. Cordelia's heart ached for her when she answered simply to some expression of surprise, on Cordelia's part, at the earnest devotion betrayed rather than displayed for the great cause of nations. "I am bound to this by a vow to the dead. I was engaged to one of the heroes of Curtatone. I have given Italy all I had ; I gave her—my betrothed." They walked on in silence. Miss Beecham's thoughts reverted to the grave which her words had recalled, and Cordelia observed her with silent and compassionate sympathy.



Just as they parted at the corner of the Via della Pergola—

“Look!” said Miss Beecham, “there goes Mr. Clayre, and a cousin of his who arrived last night, is with him.”

Norton and a gentleman were walking several yards in advance. Cordelia was looking at them and did not hear Miss Beecham. She saw them ringing at the door. She waited a moment, and knew that her servant had said she was out, for he and his companion went on.

Cordelia hastened in. She went mechanically to the window which overlooked the street they would naturally turn into. Her house was a corner house. Who was the gentleman with Norton? He was much taller, but almost as thin. He stooped, and leaned on a stick. He was lame, and the manner in which he was muffled up showed that the outward air was too sharp for his frame.

Cordelia's heart beat to suffocation. She could not see the face of the person. What ghostly resemblance was it that reminded her of Gerard? It was impossible; Norton would have told her or written to her if he had been expected. She strained her eyes after him, but in vain.

“I am bewitched,” thought Cordelia. “I have but one idea, and every thing seems to bear the



impress of it. I must ask Norton who his friend is, when I see him. I will practise now." She did so ; but she was angry to find how her hands shook ; how every time the door opened, her heart seemed to give a bound.



CHAPTER V.

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BETTINA said, "*I* have the second sight, Goethe;" but all true love has it. Cordelia's unavowed presentiments were not erring. The gentleman with Norton was Gerard.

As Norton sat alone the previous evening, having had an hour's happiness with Cordelia during the previous day, and, consequently, having a subject of happy thought for the time that should elapse till he could see her again, his door was suddenly thrown open, and a tall man muffled up in innumerable cloaks and wraps entered.

"Don't you know me, Norton?" said Gerard Clayre.

"Gerard! How glad I am! when did you arrive?"

"This very minute, and my traps are at the door; will your servant get them out? But first, do you think I can get a room for a few nights here?"

"I will ask," said Norton, and after installing his cousin in his armchair, he went along the



outside passage till he knocked at a door opposite his own. It was opened, and he was ushered into Mrs. Beecham's room.

There was no fire, though the thermometer was at 45°. Mrs. Beecham sat on the hard sofa working, with her feet on a brass-bound box containing wood ashes. There was a small bit of carpet in front of the sofa, but the other parts of the room were bare. Mabel sat by the window reading, holding the inevitable scaldino.\* There was a chill penury in the aspect of the place which suited well with Mrs. Beecham's deshabille. She was wrapped in a large shawl, her hair was put back under a black lace handkerchief, very rusty and very worn. With her afternoon attire she assumed a suavity of manner which affected even her features. Their hardness and their coarseness were hidden under an ornamental cap and curls, but now they were exposed to full view and no one could be deceived for a moment. There was something grotesque, however, in the effort she made to smile blandly when she heard Norton's errand. The smile did not harmonise with the costume.

"Yes, certainly, I have a room; but it is a sacrifice to let it for a few nights only. You will understand, my dear Mr. Clayre, that there

\* A small earthenware basket, which contains hot wood ashes, under a wire cover or lid.



must naturally be a compensation in proportion to the shortness of the time."

"Certainly." Norton was somewhat confused. "My cousin will be happy, I am sure."

But at this minute Gerard walked in. He thought it best, considering how limited his means were, not to leave the arrangements in Norton's hands.

Mrs. Beecham altered her tone immediately. She was more obsequious and more generous.

"The name?" she said.

"Clayre—Gerard Clayre."

"Mabel, will you show Mr. Gerard Clayre the room, in case he should wish any alterations in the arrangements."

Mrs. Beecham remembered the slippered, unpresentable state of her feet, and the scanty proportions of her wadded dressing-gown.

Mabel rose quietly, followed by the two young men, and led the way to the room.

They entered from the Beecham side of the house, and the room was, in fact, Mabel's. She showed them, however, that there was a door, now blocked up by a wardrobe, which opened into Norton's ante-room, and that by placing the wardrobe before the opposite door, which could be fastened both inside and out, the room was



effectually cut off from her mother's portion of the apartment.

"But the room is inhabited," said Gerard.

"Yes, at present; but it can easily be prepared for another inmate."

It had no carpet, the board was before the fireplace, and the room was chill as the saloon they had left, but the whole impression it gave was different.

There were books on the table near the window. There was scrupulous cleanliness, and there was one exquisite ornament in it. On the marble-topped chest of drawers was a small looking-glass in a carved olive-wood frame. The hand of an artist was distinctly and immediately seen in the lovely design and abundant ornamentation. Gerard glanced at it and guessed whose was the room from the inscription which wreathed the bright oval. "*Ma belle toujours.*" "*Toujours Ma Belle.*" He looked at their conductress, and was struck at a beauty which till then he had not noticed.

In a dark woollen dress, with plain linen collar and cuffs, there was something almost conventual in Miss Beecham's dress. It was so loose that the slight figure moved in it with reed-like flexibility. The features pale and delicate as a cameo, the small head, which seemed to droop beneath its weight of hair, and the pallor, as if



after some great shock the blood had never again flowed freely, combined to form a whole which might be overlooked, but which, if once noticed, riveted the attention at once. It struck Gerard that this might be the dangerous person against whom he was to guard his cousin, but a second look dispelled this idea. The gravity and sternness of her face never lightened for a moment. She listened and approved like an automaton that had been set in motion.

The arrangements were concluded, and they returned to Norton's apartment.

Gerard was pained to the heart to notice the shrunk and wasted look of his cousin, and the unmistakeable signs of disease, deep-rooted disease, impressed on his whole person ; but he was struck, at the same time, with the improvement in expression and the air of thought which seemed to have deepened and refined the aspect of the countenance. Both the young men were alike in complexion, in the colour of the eyes and hair, but, in spite of the debility of Gerard's appearance at this moment, there was a decision in his movements, a fire in his look, which gave quite a different character to his face. Norton's look was timid, and there was something flaccid in his movements. At the same time the younger man's smile was sweeter and more frank, and



the unseen Angel which was even then floating towards him shed a light on his brow. It was not gloomy and hopeless, like Gerard's, but clear and cloudless as a child's.

After they had settled themselves for the evening, Gerard thought he might as well commence inquiries as to the state of affairs.

"That was a beautiful girl," he said in an interrogative tone.

"Who, Miss Beecham?"

"Yes. I have never seen a face which impressed me more with admiration and respect."

"Ah!" The voice was so totally without interest that Gerard paused in his walk up and down the room.

"Do you mean to say you have never remarked it?"

"Never."

"She is certainly one of the most singularly beautiful women I have ever seen."

Gerard thought such blindness showed that the mischief was more serious than he at first thought.

"She is pretty, I know; but, to say the truth, there is something so exceedingly disagreeable in her mother that I try to see as little of the family as possible."

"She is not like *the* lady, is she?"

"Who do you mean?" said Norton, starting up.



" My dear fellow I must tell you the truth. I have been sent here by Sir Arthur —— "

" By Sir Arthur ? "

" Yes ; a rumour has reached him that you are deep in an attachment with some —— " .

" Who ? " said poor Norton, quite fiercely for him.

" Handsome, but designing, person, who wishes to entrap the heir of Clayre Court into marriage. "

There was a dead silence. At first Norton was very much agitated, but his deep, adoring love came to his aid. He was no longer the poor stripling whom a word from Sir Arthur could govern and persuade. He loved Cordelia.

" What can you do ? " he asked with a calm which surprised Gerard.

" I am commissioned to see the lady, to pay her off if she is to be settled in that way. "

" Gerard ! " interrupted Norton, " think if you would like any one to speak thus of Ivy, and judge by that, how you pain me. "

" At any rate, Sir Arthur wished me to make you hear reason, and to entreat you to leave Florence with me. "

Norton smiled. " That was the reason, then, that you came. I was so surprised, but I fancied your health was the cause. "

" I *was* ordered abroad, " said Gerard, " but had it not been for this scrape of yours I should



never have come. Now I have told you exactly on what mission I am bound, and you must act accordingly."

Gerard did not think it necessary to inform his cousin of the cruel threats and inuendoes of Sir Arthur, who had declared that if fair means were not successful, he would use foul. Norton was a minor as yet. He could be proved imbecile and incompetent in any court in England.

"But tell me, Norton, who is the lady?"

Norton was leaning back on the couch, his hands covered his face; he was wondering whether Cordelia would admit Gerard.

He looked up. "What did you say?"

"Tell me who is the lady? the name seems a feigned one."

"I do not know."

"Not know!"

"No; I have never inquired."

"Mrs. Watson mentioned it was a singer."

"It was Aunt Watson who wrote to Sir Arthur."

"Yes."

"Gerard, will you do me a favour?"

"As many as you please and I can grant."

"Do not let us say another word about her till you have seen her. But I will tell you one thing, that there is no question of marriage between us. *She is married.*"



"Married. Good heavens!"

Norton smiled sadly. "It is the fact. As to love, when you see her, you will understand how *I* must adore her, hopelessly adore her; and how utterly unlikely it ever could be that she should feel for me anything but compassion, and the kindness which one so angelic as she is, must ever feel towards one so unfortunate as I am."

When Norton had finished speaking he left the room, and Gerard remained in his seat paralysed with astonishment.

The whole tenor of the speech was so different from anything he had ever heard Norton utter; the firmness, the unhesitating assertion, and the consciousness it expressed of his own deficiencies, were such as only a deep feeling and thinking man could utter.

"If she has developed him thus there must be something extraordinary in her; but how could such a woman notice him at all? I will do, however, as he wishes."

When Norton returned the cousins alluded no more to the previous subject of conversation. Norton asked Gerard about India, about his return, about Ivy.

They dined together and both retired early.

Gerard found his room carpeted and made more comfortable according to English ideas, but the lovely looking-glass had been taken away.



The books, also, were gone, except an English Bible, which he found in a drawer, and a political pamphlet.

He opened his window and looked out. He was in the Via Maggio, at the end near the bridge. He could see the palace-looking buildings on the north side of the Arno shining in the moonlight. There was a great stillness for an hour or two, and then the roll of the carriages came nearer, and foot passengers returning from the theatre awoke the silence of the street. Some hummed the airs they had just heard, others sang in harmonious concord some patriotic song in which the sweet word "Italia" struck the ear with mystic and resonant cadence.



CHAPTER VI.

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THE next day Gerard and Norton called on Cordelia. As we have seen she was out. Norton scarcely knew whether he was disappointed or not, he was so anxious that Gerard should see Cordelia in the way most likely to produce an effect on him favourably.

They took a carriage, and, as it was one of the Corso days, drove out, having invited Mrs. and Miss Beecham to accompany them. Miss Beecham leant back in the carriage with grave indifference, while her mother was volubly describing the persons they passed, and repeating many a malign report and story of scandal to her inattentive auditors.

Norton was excited. He knew he should not see Cordelia, and yet there was a nervous, restless expectation about him. If one is very much absorbed in one person, though we may know that there is no chance of seeing them, there is always a strange expectant feeling in the heart. We think that from the blank windows a face will look out; that, at the corner of a street, that form



will appear, that through yonder threshold, a shadow will enter.

This is to be really haunted.

Gerard listened absently to Mrs. Beecham while his attention was attracted by Miss Beecham. There was something so singular in a woman of her age and appearance being so absolutely insensible to the usual interests of her sex. The moving throng around might make their busy observations, and some were highly complimentary; but she might have been deaf for any effect they produced, and yet she listened attentively at some points of their progress, and now and then bowed slightly to an acquaintance.

Some of the faces that passed were of great beauty. There is one peculiarity in Italian beauty, however empty the mind or cold the heart—the features always give a promise of character. There is a strength and a depth in the countenance which excites more interest than the colder, if more perfect, Saxon face.

There were some beautiful Americans, who seemed to combine in their faces the splendour of the Northern colouring with the individuality of the Southern type.

“American women are exquisitely beautiful—and rarely of a calm, sleepy kind of beauty. There is an eagerness, a longing, in their eyes which has always affected me peculiarly,” said



Gerard in answer to some observation of Mrs. Beecham's, but in reality addressing her daughter. Mrs. Beecham raised her eyebrows. She could not follow in this sphere.

"Here is a beautiful creature ; but she is one of our Florentines," said Mrs. Beecham.

A lady passed slowly by in a carriage. It was a beautiful face. The forehead was somewhat narrow, and the chin long; but the eyebrows were dark and pencilled, the lips very red and curved, the eyes large, deep set and black. She was very young and quite alone. On the seat opposite to her was a basket brimful of flowers, and she now and then languidly took one or two and tossed them to her acquaintances, while bouquets of the most exquisite flowers absolutely poured into her carriage.

Her extreme youth, for she did not seem more than eighteen, suited well with all this floral wealth ; but in her face was a look of indignant unhappiness.

Gerard noticed it.

"She was taken from her convent and married to a man in whose family there was hereditary madness. A month after her marriage he had to be put under restraint, and she has not seen him since. Her father and mother leave her to herself, and the consequences are not difficult to anticipate. Can there be a greater loneliness



than her's, and at a time when the temptations of life are so great?"

Mrs. Beecham spoke to the two young men but it was useless for her to try and turn the conversation in this direction. Norton was absent and half asleep; Gerard had no interest in such topics, and her daughter looked a hundred miles away from the scene.

A great many bouquets were thrown into their carriage; but Miss Beecham let them remain in her lap without even touching them till, as they turned into the Piazza Sta Croce, one fell from a window, which she caught, pressed to her lips, and then looked up. But no one was to be seen.

It was a small bouquet of green leaves, and red and white camellias.

"The Italian tricolor," said Gerard in a low voice to her.

"Yes;" she looked pleased, and a warm suffusion of rosy colour passed over her face, "perhaps in a month we shall all be wearing this colour, and it may become the national colour of Italy recognised by all."

"I hope so for Italy's sake."

She murmured the stornello of the Venetian poet, Dal' Ongaro.

"And when this great deed is done, Miss Beecham, what part will Tuscany take?"



"Tuscany will take no part different or isolated from the rest of Italy. She will work *with* the united whole and *in* it."

"There will be much struggle and disappointment, I fear, before you attain that."

"But we shall attain at last, and that is all that is necessary."

"Mabel, surely those are the Bayfords?" asked Mrs. Beecham, as some loud-voiced, *fast* English girls passed crowded together in a carriage.

"Yes."

"And it is not three months since their brother was killed in India."

Mrs. Beecham was becoming too much for Gerard, and he touched the coachman and jumped out of the carriage.

"I shall be back by dinner time."

"Remember, we are going to the Pergola," said Norton, waking up.

"Yes; I shall be back in time," and his tall form was seen making his way through the crowd.

Of course all wise, rational persons must look with contempt on the puerile diversions of the Carnival. At Florence it has not even the peculiar Bacchanalian termination of confetti and moccoletti as in Rome; but with the exception of the masks and masked balls, is only a repetition



of the same gaieties as at other parts of the year.

Nothing sounds more foolish than to take pleasure in driving at a footpace through crowded streets among a file of carriages of every kind, and to throw flowers at those you know and be pelted in return; yet in fact there is something picturesque and gay in it, which, for the first time at all events, pleases.

Gerard could not help being amused at the smiling faces around him. These Italians throw themselves with so much bonhomie, with so little *arrière pensée* into any out-of-door diversion; and then in that atmosphere, and under that sky, everything wears a gala look on the least provocation. The whole city seems to bloom out like a bed of flowers called into sudden life by some favourable wind. Then the occasions were all regulated by church feste, or grand ducal solemnities; but now the silken banners and gay brocades burst out in any national triumph, and the poorest house puts out its little coloured streamer, which proves it, humble as it is, one of the pulses of the mighty heart of Italy.

Gerard was sorry to notice how pre-occupied and silent Norton was. He had observed him, and thought he should instantly tell if the young man saw the woman who had so enthralled him. But he was unmoved. Gerard, with all



his own personal sorrows heaving at his heart, was interested in and attached to Norton, and he hoped he might be of some service to him.

The fact that the woman was a married woman, though it dispelled his fears in one way, increased them in another. He had written this piece of news briefly to Sir Arthur, when he wrote announcing his arrival; and he was sufficiently acquainted with Sir Arthur's disposition to know that it would at once comfort his paternal fears. All *he* dreaded was the possibility of marriage. But Gerard had sufficient experience to dread still more for his cousin an entanglement of this kind.

He knew it was the most irritating, unsatisfying, torturing feeling which it was possible to endure. In Norton's case there would be no sinful desires; he would love as purely as a child; but he would suffer as a man.

Gerard had worked himself up into quite a rage as he returned from his walk. Could she take no one else to play her infernal coquetry on, than a poor, half dying lad, like this. Norton seemed to have shot up suddenly into a man, suffering and enduring, as men suffer and endure, but he, poor fellow, had never had a boy's course of gay and thoughtless pleasure. He was steeped in the bitterness of life at an age when most men are revelling in its sweetness.



It was too bad. Gerard felt he could read her power in the change in his cousin; but it was evident it was a demoniac power, otherwise it would never have been exerted.

As he walked on a bunch of lilies of the valley, that must have been aimed skilfully, fell against his cheek. He looked up; the carriages were passing at a foot pace. The person who threw him the flowers was looking at him. He started, for he recognised at once the pale features and large short-sighted looking grey eyes of a familiar face.

He went up to the carriage and laid his hand on the door as it moved on.

"I am not mistaken, then; it is Mr. Clayre," said a voice with a foreign accent, but very sweet tone.

"Princess Bifrons!"

"Yes—we meet again, then."

"I have only been here a day."

"Have you been to the theatre yet?"

"No; are you living here?"

"For the present. Will you come to see me?"

"With pleasure."

She gave him a card with her address.

He stepped back, and the carriage moved on.

That face, that voice, recalled the past as if by magic. How strange it was they should meet again, and in Italy too!



When he reached Via Maggio, Norton was dressed and waiting dinner for him.

His cheeks were flushed and his eyes bright. Gerard observed that his breath came short and quick. Norton was wildly impatient for the moment to arrive to introduce Gerard to Cordelia.

"What a detestable woman that Mrs. Beecham is," said Gerard, as they left the dinner-table; "her house is good enough, and there is a pleasure in associating with a woman like her daughter; but I think that if I were obliged to see her every day I should run away."

"She never annoys me. I never think of her. She comes in and out, and half the time I do not attend to her. Miss Beecham is pleasant, and as I sat opposite to her to-day, I looked at her. She is certainly pretty."

"Pretty! If you call that face only pretty, I can only pray to be defended either from such mental darkness or excess of light."

Norton blushed.

"I know she is considered more than pretty by some; but to me there is something too cold and hard in her. I like a woman to have more sweetness and impulsiveness. But all this time, Gerard, you have never told me a word about yourself."

"What about myself?"

"Your plans, your——"

"My plans are soon told—as soon as I can get



rid of this lameness and debility I shall return to India. It is to be hoped the next ball will not do its work in this slovenly way."

"Gerard!"

"I was never more serious, Norton."

"You are forgetting that Clayre Court will be yours some day."

"Clayre Court! and *you*, old fellow."

"I may live or not; but of course I shall never marry."

"You say so; but you will get over this."

"You do not know what you are talking about; but, at any rate, for Ivy's sake, you must not speak so wildly. Besides, Gerard, is there not some one else?"

"No one, Norton. I recognise no one but Ivy."

"Your wife—you *did* love her," Norton spoke hesitatingly.

"It is because I so loved her that I have crumbled away into the wreck you now see. But do not speak of her—see, it is time to go. He took his cloak and gave his arm to Norton, who seemed weak and walked feebly.



CHAPTER VII.

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THE Pergola is one of the prettiest theatres in the world. If you visit it during the Carnival, when it is etiquette to be in full dress, nothing can be more animated and festal than its appearance. Its small proportions concentrate the effect of its gay decorations—white and gold. It is like a boudoir, but a singularly bright and elegant one, compared to the vast magnificence of London and Paris Opera-houses.

Gerard was struck with the amount of beauty displayed. The English and Americans shone conspicuous from their complexions.

There is nothing so disfiguring as the effects of fog and damp on a delicate English face; and I have, therefore, never seen the peculiar brilliancy of Saxon colouring appear to such advantage as in the bracing, buoyant winter air of Florence. I do not speak of their tramontana, or of the "stravaganze," as the Tuscans term them, of their winter, but of its normal state, when the sky is clear, and the air sparkling and fresh, and, above all, dry.



One American girl, who was in a box opposite, was for a few minutes after her entrance, the "point de mire" of all the house.

It was the sort of beauty one would have attributed to Mary Stuart. Lustrous black hair, arch grey eyes, pearly teeth, and a complexion like the wild rose, with a person of stately but graceful proportions. I call her a girl, for she was young; but womanly, according to the most luxuriant ideal we attach to that word, was the rich outline of that noble figure. It was a beauty which no one could deny for a moment. It was form, colouring, grace, all in perfection. That kind of beauty is as distinct and rare a gift, as genius.

But to appropriate it, or connect one's self with it, is out of the question. We look at the Kohinoor, but never dream of possessing it.

"I have never seen such a splendid creature," said Gerard.

"Yes, she is handsome," said Norton, putting down his glasses.

"That type of woman seems to belong to another race and time altogether," continued Gerard; "to that period when beauty was a recognised power, like knowledge, or wit, or rank. I cannot fancy a woman like that, framed in the proportions of a modern drawing-room. It needs an especial pedestal for such a goddess."

Norton had seated himself in front of the box,



and was evidently arranging himself so as to hear and see the stage, and the stage only. Gerard observed that he looked very pale, with the exception of the flush on the salient part of the cheek, which, more or less, never left him.

"Do you know, Norton, you make me quite nervous. May I ask you if *SHE* sings first?"

"Yes; but you do not see her at once."

At this moment the door opened, and a friend of Gerard's, whom he had not seen for several years, entered.

"I thought I knew you;—Gerard Clayre?"

"Certainly. I should have known you, Hamilton, anywhere."

"When did you arrive?"

"Two days ago. Let me introduce you to my cousin, Norton Clayre."

"Have you ever heard this woman before?"

"I have not."

"She is the most wonderful creature you ever saw—young, beautiful, with a voice like a syren; and an intenseness of feeling in her acting which is alternately pathetic and sublime."

"Indeed."

"Nothing has been heard like it since Pasta, but she is more beautiful than Pasta could ever have been. They say the offers she has had of engagements are like Jenny Lind's. She will be as rich as Cræsus, for every note is worth unheard of sums."



"She must be like the girl who never opened her mouth without rubies, and diamonds, and emeralds falling from it."

"Precisely; but it is better still, for the rubies, diamonds, and emeralds are her own, certainly; but the pleasure she gives everyone else is worth any amount of gold to them also."

"Who is she?"

"There is a mystery about her. I suspect she is English, though her name is Italian, La Signora Corda."

"La Signora Corda?"

"Yes, but an indescribable lady-likeness of appearance makes me think her English. I do not mean to say that women of other countries are not as lady-like as ours, but it is in a different manner. Our girls, for instance, have something of the independence of married women about them, and our married women have retained some of the simplicity and freshness of girlhood. In all other countries the transition is more abrupt and uncompromising. Abroad you can never mistake the *feme coverte* for the *feme sole*."

"I certainly remember a charming creature with whom I had a flirtation once, who paralysed me after an hour's conversation with her, when I was delighted at her girlish, innocent laughter and unaffected joyousness, by her telling me



incidentally that she must go home early, as she and her children were going off the next morning on some journey. You might have knocked me down with a feather. The plum retains its bloom longer with us, perhaps, because we do not keep it in a hothouse till ripe."

Norton thought the levity of these men intolerable. To him it was a very solemn moment.

Mr. Hamilton left them, for he said he had a round of visits to pay, and the cousins were again alone.

Presently the opera commenced. It was the "Lucrezia Borgia." At the first appearance of the masked figure of Lucrezia, there was enthusiastic applause. The whole house rose, and Cordelia's reception was a triumph.

Norton did not clap, he covered his eyes with his hand for a few minutes.

Gerard looked with an interest which agitated him in a way he could not account for. What was there in that black figure, in its motions and step, which recalled him one he was striving so hard to forget?"

The piece went on, and then came the scene between Gennaro and Lucrezia, when she sings, "Come e bello! che incanto," and the sweetness of the voice thrilled Gerard with a strange torture. She unmask and bends over the sleeping Gennaro, and then turns her face to the stage.



Gerard started to his feet.

"What is the matter?" exclaimed Norton.

"You are ill—what is the matter?"

Gerard literally could not speak. The sounds were all confused in his ear—that face seemed approaching nearer and nearer; he threw his hands forward and sank down on a seat near the door, with the sensations of a man prostrated by some stunning blow.

The sweet voice was flowing out in waves of melody; you might have heard a pin drop, the audience were so attentive, following, with ear and heart, the exquisite cadences. Gerard had given a sign to Norton not to speak, and he, poor fellow, was drinking in the poison of that delicious presence, of that enchanting voice, utterly unconscious of the pain, the keen pain, which Gerard endured.

The first feeling of Gerard had been a desire to escape, but his limbs, weakened by his recent illness, refused to bear him, and during those moments of forced motionlessness he was struggling with himself to be a man, and to conquer his coward heart.

He was here, and he must hear it. That was all that distinctly articulated itself in his mind.

Indignation, hatred, recollections of past love, admiration, all blended themselves together.

"His wife!"



*There* was the sting—she was his, and he was hers. Revolt as they might, go where they would, the chain was inextricable.

At last the trembling of his hands was controlled, he wiped the damps from his forehead, he breathed a long, gasping breath, and felt he would sit it out.

“Are you not well?” said Norton, hearing him move.

“Not very well. My illness——” he began stammering; but he was saved the trouble of further reply, for Norton had turned again to the stage.

Then Gerard looked at him and saw how his face seemed transfigured with happiness. A ghastly recollection shot through him.

“This was the woman Norton loved!”

He did not look up again, but sat at the back of the box, listening as in a dream.

The music seemed to be played on his bare nerves, they shrank so vividly from it. The lights, the noise, were like the phantasmagoria of a fever, or the delusions of some infernal Walpurgisnacht; the fearful revelries of demons, which, to expiate some dreadful sin, he was obliged to witness.

He had longings to look at her, to show himself, but he could not. In all those tiers of boxes he was the only person whose eyes were not riveted on the stage.



He was reflecting, as well as his agitation would allow him, on what had best be done.

He came to one resolve. He would never forgive her. She was an actress, a public singer, and the separation was an irrevocable one. He would not acknowledge the tie that existed between them; he would see Cordelia and insist that she should obey him in this. That was the one definite purpose in his mind;—all that he could arrive at in that place.

Norton was so absorbed that he did not notice him. Gerard was as pale as death, his hands were clasped together, and his eyes fixed on the ground. A burst of shouts made him at last mechanically raise his head.

It was at the end of the trio with the Duke and Gennaro. She looked regally beautiful; and, what was peculiar, the delicacy of the features was not lost in the stage splendour. She had managed her dress with great art. It was not (according to the cant word) theatrical, yet was appropriate. She looked like a picture of the real Duchess of Ferrara, not a mimic representative.

Having once looked, he could not withdraw his eyes. He had really forgotten how beautiful she was. A refined and flower-like beauty, more engaging, if less effective, than the gorgeous American opposite. It was the difference between a tulip and a rose.



And she was his own ; and a thousand eyes were on her, and a thousand hearts were beating at every note of her voice, and all could speak of her, and criticise her, and applaud her.

A fierce pang of jealousy stabbed him through and through. He felt as if he must go that minute and bear her off somewhere where none but himself should ever see her face again.

He remembered then the accent in which she had answered him once, when, after their fatal quarrel, he had said she might remain if she chose with him.

“Never, Gerard, never.”

He had brought all this on himself.

She looked older, her figure was more rounded, and the graceful head was borne more proudly than it used to be.

He observed particularly the lovely line from ear to shoulder which was one of Cordelia's distinctive beauties. It was fair as ever.

His blood tingled in his veins with an ardour which took away his breath. He felt if the trial continued, he must sink under it. He must faint ; he must shout. It was unendurable. At last it was over—the flowers were showered upon her—she was called forwards again and again to receive the acclamations of the people. She looked up the last time, by the merest accident, at Norton's box. She saw him bending forward with adoring eyes.



Who was by his side ?

"What a glorious creature," said Hamilton, entering. "But see—what is the matter ? she has fainted away. Over excitement, of course."

"I must go and see what it is," said Norton, impetuously.

They went down stairs, and when they reached the stage Hamilton and Norton went towards the interior of the theatre.

They came back in a few minutes.

"She has gone home," said Hamilton.

"I will stop at her house and inquire," said Norton.

They took leave of Hamilton, and gave the coachman orders.

They were both silent till they reached Cordelia's door. Norton got out and went up-stairs.

He returned directly. "La Signora was not well, and had retired to bed."

Gerard had looked up eagerly to hear this, and then leant back.

"Is she not beautiful, Gerard ?"

"Yes."

"Are you surprised that I love her ? She is as good as she is beautiful."

"Norton, my poor boy, I am sorry for you ; with my whole heart I say it,"



CHAPTER VIII.

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NO one who had seen Cordelia the previous evening would have recognised her as she leaned back in her chair the next morning, trying to decide whether she should remain in Florence or leave it.

It was like a picture over which a sponge had been passed. Colour was blotted out, and the outline was altered. She seemed actually withered. That her husband should act with such indifference: that he should come to Italy with the knowledge that she was there, and not guess that she was the Signora Corda who was becoming so celebrated in Florence, was perhaps to be blamed as an over-sensitiveness; but having seen her and recognised her, neither to come nor send was to prove that his animosity and alienation were strong as ever.

How angry she was at the weakness of heart which made it such pain. The pain was embittered too by a feeling sickening to her self-love, that in the midst of all there was, what we must borrow a term from the French



to express, a certain acre volupté, that after all she had seen him again.

Poor Cordelia ! the struggle between the keen resentment and the deep fidelity of her heart had been so strong, that she had passed the hours since that fatal moment in a fever of suffering and self-reproach. Her first impulse had been to leave Florence ; only a few nights more remained of her engagement. She had entered into another for the spring at Milan. She would repay to the impresario what he might lose. That thought was abandoned. It was impossible, she knew, except in cases of absolute illness, with the properly attested certificates from the doctor ; and there could be no hope of that.

She was ill, but it was not an illness which kept her to her bed. There was no physical impossibility which would prevent her from singing.

Then came the dejected feeling that she must accustom herself to this. It was quite impossible not to feel that they might often thus meet. In time, perhaps, she would be as unmoved as he no doubt was. Were they not strangers now and henceforth ? She sat with her face buried in her hands, and heard not the opening of the outer door.

Steps approached, and the door was opened. She looked up, and Cordelia and Gerard met once more !



In a glance both took in the change in the other's face. To both it was like a dagger's stab; but the pride, which was the great characteristic of both, came to their aid.

"I have come early," said Gerard, in a grave, calm voice; "and I must apologise for intruding upon you at such an hour; but I wished to speak to you before Norton came."

Cordelia had risen. She pointed to a seat, and sat down herself. If that was going to be his ruthless tone, she would bear it unflinchingly.

"For reasons," continued Gerard, "that I will not trouble you with, I have not told Norton of —."

"What!"

Cordelia's voice was hollow and hard.

"That we—that I know you."

"Ah!"

"I come to ask you to avoid mentioning it."

"Do you leave Florence?"

"Not immediately; I must stay with him. Are you aware how ill he is?"

"Yes, poor fellow, I know he is very ill."

"I am afraid of the agitation that such a discovery would produce. I could not tell him at once. We must wait."

"I shall be silent."

Her lips curled as she spoke. To care so much for others, to be so regardless of her——Alas!



"He has asked me to accompany him to see you this very day, and I came first to tell you this."

"Not to-day—not to-day." She controlled herself, but her voice was somewhat broken.

There was a pause. Even on the rack there are moments of pause given. Moments, we are told, that have an infinite voluptuousness from force of contrast in them.

Gerard looked at her. What woman's beauty had ever touched his heart like that peculiar combination of grace, elegance, and simplicity which was hers? It was not difficult to maintain an aggrieved sense of wrong when away from her, but within reach of the mystic influences of a loved presence, how hard it is to keep up a sullen inexorableness.

The room was a very ordinary specimen of an Italian lodging-house drawing-room.

There is so much beauty out of doors in Italy that the inhabitants seem to think themselves exonerated from any care or trouble as to beautifying their mansions in-doors. They have little regard to harmony of colour in their decorations, and all the numberless inventions and contrivances which mark "the insane love of comfort" which distinguishes the Anglo-Saxon race, are utterly ignored by them. Now and then, however, the very fact of being in Italy is manifested *by some ornament, some relic, some specimen*



which breathes in itself the very essence of the "lovely land."

On Cordelia's walls hung some strange-looking prints in old-fashioned wooden frames, and one had the place of honour over the piano. It was a tolerable engraving from a picture of Giorgione's. A man, who looked like a Moor, with a handsome, earnest face, was talking to a fair woman, seen in profile, who was listening with a wounded, pained, yet gentle look, which was very fascinating.

It might have been Othello and Desdemona.

Both Gerard and Cordelia sat where they could see it, and both in that moment's pause looked at it.

"This is a pleasant room," said Gerard, who blushed as his eyes met Cordelia's after looking at the print.

"It is in the situation best adapted for me."

"Do you like Florence?"

"Yes."

"What made you choose Florence?"

"A friend procured me an engagement here."

Both speaker and hearer blushed scarlet at the word "friend."

"Have you been here long?"

"About four months."

"May I hope that you will accede to my request?"



"To receive you as a stranger!"

"My first duty is to protect Norton from the least agitation."

"Your first duty!"

"I acknowledge no other." A sterner inflection was in Gerard's voice, as he went on; "Norton will not ask you if you have ever seen me before, and it will not be an act of hypocrisy to meet as strangers."

"Certainly not—as you will."

"If he wishes to come to-day, can he come?"

There was another pause.

"Yes."

"I have been interrupting you, I fear. Good morning."

"Good morning."

"I have a visit to pay to the Princess Bifrons this afternoon, but Norton and I will be here about one o'clock."

Cordelia turned white at the name of the Princess, but remained silent.

There was a rigid and set look in both faces as they separated. And this was the meeting to which Ivy had looked forward with such hope. They had met, and this was the result. Alas! what external circumstance could befriend those whose own bitter and resentful passions betrayed them.

"Heartless, cold-hearted," murmured Gerard



in a towering rage as he walked down the street.

"I must bear it," said Cordelia, white as a sheet, clasping her hands together.

All the softness, all the irresolution of her soul was gone. She was firm, decided, resolute, that that man should be less than nothing to her. Her eyes fell on her wedding-ring, and she shuddered.

At one o'clock the cousins came. Norton was too absorbed in his own sensations to think of introducing Gerard, and did not notice that Gerard took his seat, and talked like an acquaintance.

"I was so sorry you were taken ill," said Norton, tenderly. "It was the excitement of that arduous part, I suppose?"

"Yes—and the intense cold together. I was sorry to make such a finale."

"But you are well to-day?"

"Oh, yes; only a little shaken. I shall be quite well in a day or two."

"Shall you sing in that opera again?"

"I believe so. Do you like it?"

"Yes; I like the music and the story, but——"

"What?"

"I cannot bear to see you in that part."

Cordelia smiled faintly.

"It is not a part I like myself. There is such



selfishness from beginning to end. Lucrezia is a mother, but only in the sense that the wild beasts are. Love and pity for Gennaro does not make her think of the other mothers that she deprives of their sons."

"True," said Norton.

"It is that kind of instinctive feeling which women possess to a greater excess than men, and they dignify it with the name of feeling, when, in fact, it is only a sense." Gerard infused the bitterness he felt in all he said.

"Some men deny the force of the ties of blood altogether."

"I do not believe in their power. Separate a brother and sister, or two brothers, from their cradles for fifty years, what affection can they have for each other?"

"Only this: that if at that end of time they are thrown together with that consciousness, there is a predisposition which prepares the ground for affection; and there can be no doubt or misgivings as to that affection. There can be nothing but trust in it."

"I wish I had had a sister," said Norton, wistfully. "You are a lucky fellow, Gerard."

"Ivy is a good girl." Gerard avoided Cordelia's eyes, which were fixed on him. "But to return to Lucrezia. The play always had a *strange* fascination in it for me. The way Lucrezia



tries the effect of her beauty and fascination on her husband is so terrible, and yet with an undertone of pathos which rivets one to the scene. She is so helpless too, in spite of all her power and strength ; her crimes have imprisoned her, as it were, within a steel wall, from which she cannot escape. She beats against it in vain."

"And the idea that it is her own work : that one good impulse, one right deed, would have made a way for escape, must so add to the torture. It is a terrible tragedy."

"Miss Beecham met me as I was coming out, and asked me to give you this note. She cannot keep her engagement with you, she says."

"I am sorry."

"What a remarkable person Miss Beecham is," said Gerard. "So much beauty, and such thorough unconsciousness of it."

"She has bewitched you, Gerard," said Norton. "You have spoken of nothing else since you arrived. What a pity you are not a free man."

"Yes, Miss Beecham is a singularly interesting person," said Cordelia, looking for the first time steadfastly at Gerard. "It is so rare to find any woman so entirely occupied with public and national events as she is."

"I do not understand how she can belong to such a woman as Mrs. Beecham," said Norton, "so fawning, so curious, so ill-tempered, and so



grasping. She and Knox are at daggers drawn continually, and every day I expect to hear of some hideous quarrel. I am more alarmed at her than at any one else in the world, except Sir Arthur. Her face always looks to me like one of those puzzles we give children. A bland-looking individual, in the shape of a little wooden Turk is before you, and you unguardedly touch a spring, and a devil jumps out of his turban. Her eyes look so sharp and wicked, and her smile is so soft."

Gerard smiled. "You have observed her closely, Norton."

"She used to come very often when I was first in her house and talk to me by the hour together."

"About what?"

"I never listened much; but I think she used to tell stories of people in the place. She seems to know something evil of every one, especially of women. According to her, every other person at Florence is disreputable."

"Of course," said Cordelia, rather scornfully, "she would be most severe on women. I wonder when women will ever be taught consideration for each other—not as they seem, but as they really are."

"And what are they?" asked Gerard. "Something divine—or something frail?—half passion, half clay?"



"Women, I do not know many; but to me it seems they are——"

"Angels, of course, dear Norton. There are some, certainly, who are faithful and affectionate."

"Yes, that is exactly the way," said Cordelia; "women and dogs are thought of much in the same way. A dog is worshipped in one country, muzzled in another. We are much obliged, but we would rather not be looked at so much from below, or from such heights above. If we were placed side by side with men, I think we could stand the comparison."

Norton looked at her as if he thought, whatever might be the proper position of other women, *she* was one to be worshipped. Gerard's face wore the savage and somewhat sarcastic look it had done from the commencement.

It was very difficult to keep up the conversation; it suddenly lapsed and paused. Norton thought she must be more ill than she avowed; and after they had taken leave of her, he said to Gerard: "I am afraid she is over-tired. Did you see how her hands shook all the time?"



## CHAPTER IX.

PRINCESS BIFRONS lived in a villa just within one of the gates of Florence. The entrance was from the street, and the house from that side looked an ordinary Florentine house. The lower windows barred with heavy bars and surmounted with ponderous stone copings. The upper windows closed with outside Persiané. But the aspect changed the moment the door was opened. It led into a vestibule adorned with statues, and closed at the opposite end from the entrance with large iron-trellised gates, through which a view was obtained of a beautiful garden fragrant with flowers and picturesque with trees. On the left of the vestibule a broad and carpeted staircase led in shallow flights to a lofty gallery blazing with sunshine. In this gallery were four arched windows of great height and breadth, and their arches were defined by panes of ruby-coloured glass, which gave a still warmer glow to the light which streamed in. Between each window was a stand of flowers of the rarest kind, pyramidically piled to the ceiling. At the end was



an aviary full of birds. Opposite the four windows were heavy crimson and gold brocade curtains, which masked glass doors opening into four rooms, each furnished differently, but with equal costliness. Along this gallery were placed stands with books, pictures, engravings, statuettes. The ceiling was beautifully but fantastically carved in cedar and gold. On an easel was an unfinished picture. The Princess was highly accomplished both in painting and modelling.

Gerard followed the servant along the gallery, which was warm and bright as a tropical summer, though the snow still covered the summit of the Bologna mountains, seen through the trees. The landscape without was in such contrast with the voluptuous character within, that it looked like a transparency or scenic decoration.

It was in the room at the further end that the Princess received. Gerard found her talking, in her calm, indolent, slow way, to a man in a priest's dress, who was sitting with her. The Princess was in black, in a dress something like a nun's conventual garb ; round her head a scarf of the most transparent tulle was folded like a nun's band, and the long ends floated on each side of her small, slight figure. It was a coquettish device, for few women's faces could have borne the line which so distinctly, yet without relief, marked the contour and displayed its thin oval. At the same



time it was artful, because it is round the throat and beneath the chin that the traces of age are least to be concealed. Either by falling away or becoming grossly exaggerated, all the pretty modelling which is so firm yet soft in youth disappears. The folds of the gauzy fabric hid all this, supposing it was there. The abruptness of the deep black hair against the pale face was also softened. A large tiger skin was on the couch, on which the Princess reclined, and the head of the beast stuffed and with brilliant eyes watching beside her, formed the pillow which supported her. The rest of the room was like the parlour of an abbess. Ivory and ebony cabinets, an exquisite silver crucifix, which bore the signature of Felicie de Fauveau, was on the table beside her. Everything in the room but the sofa cover had a religious character. There was certainly a change since Gerard had seen her.

“Mr. Clayre I am glad to see you,” she said, and then went on with her conversation with the priest. He then rose, and picking up his broad-leafed hat, bowed; and his dapper silken legs and buckled shoes vanished through the heavy curtains and down the gallery, the birds in the aviary screaming a dissonant yet musical chorus of jubilee, as if they rejoiced at his disappearance.

While she was talking to the priest, Gerard had



time to look at the room and at its mistress. He had not seen her since he left Italy, and the whole *mise en scène* was different from what he remembered.

He had left her a brilliant woman of the world, with a strong tendency to extreme liberalism in her religious and political opinions, and with the love of intrigue which was so peculiar to her race, mixed up with all sorts of secret societies, in correspondence with proscribed persons, and apparently known to all those who were in the confidence of the leaders in the popular cause. Despotic as she was by education and nature, there was something piquant to her in this coquetry with opinions which were the reverse of all her real inclinations, and she had for a time thoroughly delighted in it all. But she was of too restless a nature to remain fixed long to anything, and she had now tried another phase of opinion.

He saw books by Montalembert on the table, Xavier de Maistre's works were in a small book-case opposite to him, and the few words which he overheard of her conversation with the priest, were about some donation to a religious institution. He smiled to himself. He knew enough of her and of her antecedents not to be much edified with the change; and yet he felt indulgent towards her. He had once liked, not loved her.



Passion may turn to hate—warm love may be soured and inflamed, but the holiday liking which Gerard had for the Princess leaves a kind of toleration even when it has sunk into indifference.

“You must excuse me,” she began, “but most important business obliged me to keep you waiting; but I am free now, and let us have one of our long conversations. First, how is your cousin?”

“Very ill, I fear.”

“I am so glad I recommended Mrs. Watson to leave him with Mrs. Beecham. She is an excellent person, and will take every care of him. But is he not very imprudent? Whenever I go to the Pergola, he is always there, and sometimes the weather is most severe. But you, are you well.” She saw that a shadow had passed over Gerard’s face with the last part of her sentence.

“Thank you, quite well.”

“You are changed though.”

“Perhaps; in some things certainly.”

“We are all changed,” and she raised her fine eyes to the ceiling.

“Your tastes and occupations seem different from what they were.”

“Yes, I find, as I become older, that the only things which really satisfy the heart, are of a very serious nature. The more one tries, the



more one learns how inadequate, ambition, success, bold theories, political excitements, are to give real interest to life. Charity, religious works, give unfailing sources of interest to one's existence."

"Indeed!"

"Since I have seen you, Mr. Clayre, I have learned to believe."

"Have you found more faith and charity in your present associates than you did in your former ones? Priests were not admitted formerly, if I remember?"

"I have attached myself to the Society of St. Paul, and my whole time is now devoted to working with, and for, that Society. We, poor isolated women require some engrossing occupation. I travel a good deal in behalf of the Society, and it is wonderful what ramifications it has, and what influence it exercises. You would be surprised if you knew how much we have in our power. I came to Florence on a mission connected with it." Translated into the language of truth, this phrase would have been, "I came to Florence to watch your wife. I guessed she was the Signora Corda."

She rested her small white hand on the tawny fur of her couch, and through all the repose of her attitude and languor of her expression a flash in her eyes revealed that nothing in the



room was in such harmony with her secret soul as the tiger on which she leant.

A Russian woman of a certain class has always something barbaric and despotic *au fond*, in spite of the refinement of her education, and one stumbles upon it unawares. And besides that leaven of her race, this woman individually worshipped power. Obtained by beauty, or by talents, or by wealth, or by political struggles, or by religious intrigues, she cared not, but possess it she must. To draw the strings which moved the puppets she saw all round her, that was her aim. In this restless activity she forgot some of her own dark secrets, and it was a palliation to her consciousness of her own sins, to be a witness, as she was, of the errors, the deceptions, and the guilt of others. As an agent of a religious society, her sphere was much enlarged from what it had been as one of the liberal propaganda.

For a fleeting space in her life she had loved Gerard, if such a feeling could be called love; but she was essentially fickle, and it had soon evaporated; but she did not afterwards absolutely dislike him. If she could have suddenly appeared before him as a smiling Providence, to change his fate to one of her own choice, she would have been glad, but the person she thoroughly hated was Cordelia. She hated her with a determined



and deadly hate, which had the eager, yet patient ferocity of a wild beast.

"And, Sir Arthur; how is he?"

"Well, I believe."

"How he abused you when I was last in London. How angrily he inveighed against your marriage. According to him, an heiress with untold sums was waiting for your Sultan-ship to throw the handkerchief, when you ruined yourself by your ill-assorted marriage."

"Pray do not repeat what Sir Arthur said."

"No; but I pitied him, for he said the fortune of the lady he had chosen for your wife would have at once restored the Clayres to their original position, which has been gradually tarnished and impoverished by many foolish ones of that name."

"It is useless to speak of that."

"By-the-bye, what a success Madame Clayre has had. I always told you her true vocation was the stage."

"Yes."

"You went to the theatre, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Did you find her changed?"

"Very much so."

"How? she seems to me more beautiful than she was."

"I do not think so." In Gerard's eyes at



that moment everything was changed and altered; he felt ashamed to confess that the love he had thought dead and buried was awake, and tortured him. If it did, no one should know it; he would not have put up with the Princess's scrutiny, but he had an object in the visit, and he would not leave till he had fulfilled it.

"How do you think her changed?"

"In everything—face, figure, complexion, the very colour of her hair; why, it looks as dark as yours, now; what can she have done to it?"

Gerard was not aware what a brutal speech that was, for he had just said Cordelia was lamentably altered, and he adduced this similarity in proof of it.

"Ah! you always liked fair hair." The Princess smiled archly; she cared in truth very little for the disparagement, but the manner in which it was said stung her; she added it therefore to her sum of injuries received from, and injuries to be avenged on, Cordelia.

"I beg your pardon, I am talking nonsense."

"One thing you must remember, the effect of the lights and the difference in dress; on the stage and off the stage, the same woman looks as different as light from darkness."

That was all her revenge on Gerard; she rather laid a stress on the fact that his wife should be thus spoken of.



"I wanted to ask you," said Gerard, taking up a curiously blazoned missal on the table, "if you knew whether that fellow Corsand is here?"

"Corsand? no. Shall I find out? my occupations enable me to know pretty well most of the persons who are to be found in any city where I am. Besides, I have sometimes come across his name and his influence, for you know he has enormous means at his disposal for all works of benevolence, and he distributes his alms most munificently, in England, France, Germany, and Italy."

"Thanks;" and Gerard rose and shook hands with her. Princess Bifrons knew perfectly well M. Corsand was not in Florence, but she was one of those women whose first impulse is reticence. "The truth, but not the whole truth, ever; and where it answers my purpose, as little of the truth as possible."

For some moments after Gerard left her, the Princess remained deep in thought, with her eyes fixed on the carpet, while she unconsciously stroked the tiger fur of the couch on which she sat. At last she looked up with the air of a person who has come to a decision.



CHAPTER X.

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THE day after the cousins had called, Norton was not well enough to go out. His health was subject to these vicissitudes ; one day comparatively well, one day absolutely ill.

Cordelia had maintained a rigid calm after her conversation with her husband ; she had practised her songs, she had read, she had taken her usual walk, though the sky seemed brass-bound, and the earth a sepulchre ; but she was fiercely determined to punish herself for the weak, vacillating regrets of the last few weeks. She saw that Gerard had partially recovered his health. He was indifferent, he had passed through the stage of suffering and struggle, he had reached the shore of apathy and stoicism, why should *she* mourn and consume her soul in grief.

The evening came. Since her *début* she had never felt so timid, when the moment came for her appearance on the stage. Her first notes were husky and veiled, but the storm of approbation and welcome which greeted her enabled her to pause for a few moments. She then seemed



to breathe more freely and sang nearly as well as ever. Had her eye been able to investigate the house more thoroughly, she would have seen at the back of the pit a face pale, indignant, wistful, which was riveted on her every movement.

But afterwards came a reaction. For some days there was an oppression in the very atmosphere of her room. The presence of Gerard seemed to remain there. She could fancy him still seated opposite to her, looking cold and alienated, as he did when he uttered his sarcastic speeches *at* her or *to* her. And this was the man she dreamed had loved her once, and whom she feared that in the depths of her own heart she loved still. She envied Norton the care and tenderness shown to him by Gerard, while at other moments she steeled her heart against her husband with the remembrance of her own past wrongs, and condemned the kindness shown to Norton as an aggravation of his cruelty towards her. So inconsistent are we all, even the best of us at times, and Cordelia, generous and good as she was in many respects, was a very faulty creature.

One morning Liesa had asked her advice about some head-dress she was to wear in a new part; and glad of something to call her out of herself, she had offered to make it for her, and went upstairs into the Russian girl's room to arrange it, and suit it to the rest of the dress. Liesa was



working at this, running up and down a scale at intervals, and at other moments telling Cordelia about a splendid concert Princess Bifrons had given two evenings before.

"What did you sing?" asked Cordelia.

"My songs in the *Trovatore* and *Il Segreto*, and half a dozen others."

"Were there a great many persons?"

"Yes, a great many, and the Princess was so animated! She has generally such a languid, sleepy look, but she laughed and talked, and was for once, in my opinion, really handsome."

"She is considered handsome by every one."

"Yes, but I know her face so well, and I don't like it generally—that Miss Beecham was there—now she is really very handsome, but I heard several persons speak of her as 'La Morte,' she is so pale."

"Who was with her?"

"Her mother; there was also a tall Englishman, who came with them, I think, but he is an old friend of Princess Bifrons, for I heard her say several times, 'Don't you remember, Mr. Clayre.'"

"Ah!"

"He is cousin, I believe, to the young man who is dying, and when he dies, this Englishman will be a great milord."

"Why, Liesa, you are quite a 'chronique



scandaleuse;’ you are as bad as Mrs. Beecham herself, who, I hear, is the ‘mauvaise langue par excellence’ of Florence.”

Liesa laughed. “You see, when I am not singing, I have plenty of time to look about me and observe; few people speak to me, and I try to amuse myself as I can. I sit so quiet, that people who are quite near me sometimes do not know I am there. The last time I slipped out of the concert-room, it was so hot, and I went into one of the rooms leading to the gallery; it was quite deserted, and I sat behind the curtains which separate it from the gallery, and shut my eyes listening to the distant music; it was delicious to be so still and alone. Presently the Princess and that Englishman who is such a friend of hers, came in, and they talked a long time. He was asking her to go to the *veglione*, but she refused.”

“Did you listen? oh, Liesa!”

“I did not like to move, and as they were talking quite loud, I did not suppose it was a confidence, so I remained. She kept reminding him of such things, and once he kissed her hand.”

“Go on.”

“I thought you wanted something, you looked at me so earnestly. Well, where was I? He kissed her hand, and then they spoke of the opera and of music, and he talked such nonsense—he



said he should like to burn every bit of music in the world. Just think, dear Madame."

"Well."

"And the Princess laughed very satirically, and she said, 'It is all your own fault.'"

"Then!"

"I heard him say, 'Oh that I had listened to your warnings, but I was mad, blind, besotted—and now I am bound for ever. I, Gerard Clayre, married to an actress!'"

"And she?"

"She said, 'My dear friend, no one grieves for you more than I do; but——'"

"'She defies me in every way—has done so from the moment Mrs. Vibert died. Oh what a miserable hour for me was that in which I first saw her.'"

Cordelia rose to her feet, but she made a sign for Liesa to go on.

"They stood for a few moments quite near me, and I heard him say, 'And Norton bewitched by her!'"

"'Does your cousin know that she is your wife?'"

"'No; I am afraid to tell him.'"

"'He should be told; but, at any rate, if you disapprove of her adopting the profession of the stage, stop it.'"

"I assure you, dear Madame, he looked like a mad man, and kissed her hand as he said,



‘You have always been my good friend. I have no one to thank but myself, for you advised me from the first.’”

“Go on.”

“And he said what I could not understand ; but she answered him very quickly, ‘You have the husband’s right to prevent it, I suppose.’ And he said, ‘Only in one way, and that I dare not.’

“‘You mean by asking her to forgive you ; or forgiving her, which is it ?’ the Princess said, ‘and living together again. Why don’t you do so ?’”

“And what did he answer ?” Cordelia’s lips were white with the force with which she compressed them.

“I did not hear ; but she said, ‘You need not be afraid ; it is not your love she cares for. You are a different person now ; when that poor boy dies, you are the heir, and what is the old man’s life—it will all very soon be yours. She will not reject you now, depend upon it.’

“And then they returned to the music-room. They talked as if the Englishman were married ; but certainly, if I had not heard them, I should have fancied them lovers, and I have never seen the Princess so frank and intimate with any one. Before I left the house I took the opportunity of letting her know I was just outside the gallery when she was walking there ; and she gave me one of her bad looks. She can make her eyes so cruel.



“ ‘Were you there?’ she said. ‘Then you heard all!’—and she stopped, and then went on again; ‘I am not sorry, child; pray repeat it to whom it may concern.’ I think she knew I was there all the time.”

There was a pause. Cordelia’s heart was beating fast and hard. She would not trust herself to speak till she could control it. At last she had conquered, and could look up, as she thought, calmly. She was not aware how deadly pale she was.

“Here is your head-dress, Liesa.”

“Beautiful! Dear, dear, Madame, how shall I thank you;—but you have tired yourself; you are quite pale.”

“It is nothing—the stove perhaps; let me sit here quiet for a minute or two.”

“I will open the window, and let in a little fresh air.”

Liesa did so, and as she stood by it, said, “Here she is!”

“Who?”

“The Princess! there, there’s the bell. I wonder if she is getting out, or if it is only a message. Ah! I see; she is getting out herself.”

Cordelia rose, and then sat down, her head was too giddy to allow her to stand. In going down she would have passed the Princess, and Liesa had only the one room, even if her sense of what



was due to herself had permitted her to retire from the presence of her enemy or quondam friend.

"Liesa," she said, weariedly, "I really am not well; just go down and meet your friend, and take her into my room. You can say you are not alone, that I am here, if you like, and that is why you take her there."

Liesa ran down and met the Princess as she was ascending the stairs.

"I am glad, Liesa, you were coming down, as it saves me that interminable flight of stairs. I wished to ask you something; I shall not stop a minute."

"Will you come here, then,—there is no one here;" and she opened the door of the ante-room and led the way into Cordelia's sitting-room.

"This is the Signora Corda's room?"

"Yes."

"She is out, then, that you have brought me here. I wished to ask you if you were going to the veglione."

"Yes; not to night though—on Tuesday, the last night."

"Where is your domino?"

Liesa flew upstairs to fetch it.

"Quite a plain one, I see; let me have it. I will come here at midnight, and put it on. I want to 'intriguer' a friend, and shall slip out



of my box and come here, and I will send it you to-morrow. This, then, is the cage of the bird who sings so divinely."

Liesa stood, as a hint to the Princess not to linger, but she very coolly and deliberately took a survey of everything. She looked at the music on the piano, she touched the books on the table, and paused so long over one half-bound, with a clasp and lock, that Liesa thought she was going to appropriate it—and then, with a nod, she left the room. As she went down she turned and said in a loud voice—

"I would give your Signora Corda half the salary she is to have for this carnival, to let me have that book in my possession one day.

Liesa was silent; and, laughing at the aghast look of the girl, the Princess entered her carriage and drove off.

Cordelia had sat quite still for a few minutes after Liesa left her, her coward heart trembling within her at what Liesa had told her. Were there yet some dregs in the cup of sorrow which she had not yet tasted? This base and impotent jealousy, could she not cast it behind her? Why was that woman always to be beside her, to torture and to sting? As she was thus brooding over her wrongs, her eyes fell on Liesa's modest toilet-table, and saw that beside the glass there was a small miniature. She got up and looked



at it. It was a man in the uniform of a Russian private. She remembered the miniature. It was very small, and she recollected instantly, from a peculiarity in the setting, that she had seen it before.

When Liesa returned, she asked her who it was, and as she asked she was struck by the likeness, and not surprised when Liesa said, "My father—the Princess gave it me; he was in her husband's regiment. He died before I was born. The Princess gave it me one day when she was very ill. She thought she was dying, and sent for me and gave me that."

"And your mother?"

"I have never heard anything about her. When I was quite a little child the Princess told me never to ask. It is quite faded, you see, and here is a dent, as if it had received a blow."

Cordelia listened to her, and looked at her. She understood it all now. Revenge was in her power, for the truth flashed on her. Liesa, then, was the deserted child whose existence had been concealed by the Princess.

Liesa then told her of the conference between herself and the Princess, and of her coveting the book with the clasp.

Cordelia did not seem to be attending, for she sat with her head buried in her hands. At last she looked up.



"There is nothing different in your domino from any other, is there?"

"Nothing but the blue rosette at the wrist."

"Where did you get it?"

"In the Mercato Nuovo. Shall I tell your maid?"

"If you please. I think I shall go."

"Alone?"

"Yes; just for half an hour. Now, I will go down and rest. I am glad you like your head-dress, Liesa."

Cordelia was sick at heart. Never, at any time since her marriage, had she regretted it so bitterly or so resentfully. She felt as if she did not know which of the two she scorned and loathed most—Gerard or the Princess. There was a burning wish at her heart to throw on her enemies, as she termed them, some of the pain she was writhing under. How she longed for an opportunity to crush with her woman's contempt the man who dared to think he was still master of her fate, to take or to leave her; and the woman who, stained with an inexpiable shame herself, sought to ruin the honour and happiness of others. Old stories about the Princess rose to her memory. She had seen her wear that bracelet. If it were the portrait of Liesa's father, it was he who was the first husband of the proud Princess Bifrons.

She took up the clasped book on the table.



That little book and her wedding-ring were the only records of her past life. In those pages were written down her brief joys, her betrayed love, her sudden and overwhelming grief. She had an impulse to throw it into the fire, that all might perish together at once. She would have done so; but as her eyes fell on it she saw the name of her father. No, for his sake she would not; there was the justification of her conduct, if she died before him, as she trusted she might. She wished him to read and see for himself how innocent, how wronged she had been. She looked at it, and then, with an impulse to separate herself from the past wholly, if she would not or could not destroy it, she took the book, packed it up, and wrote on the cover, "To be opened only in case of my death." She then addressed it to M. Corsand. She tore off her wedding-ring, and was going to place it with it; but with the action a ray of better feelings dawned. She replaced the ring, and for a minute sat looking at it with a self-compassion which was too deep for tears.

In a few minutes she roused herself, and calling Carlo, she gave him the packet, and told him to take it to the French Embassy.

While she thus sat, Norton was announced, and this time alone.

"Are you going out?" he asked.

"No."



"I came this afternoon late, for we were kept in this morning by Princess Bifrons, who called."

"She is a great friend of your cousin's."

"Yes, and of Sir Arthur too—but Gerard admires her extremely, and she seems delighted with him. To me . . ."

"What!"

"To me, I may be wrong, she seems dangerous and wicked. She speaks as if she were quite out of the world—yet no one seems to me so worldly. She has such cruel eyes, and such a false voice, and I am almost superstitiously afraid of her."

Cordelia noticed how ill Norton looked. "Are you prudent to be out to-day?"

"I feel quite well. Besides, I must be strong for this evening's veglione, and I have promised to take Mrs. Beecham and her daughter. I wish I could persuade you to come with us."

"Oh no; I never go out—I mean I never join the amusement of others."

"But masked and in a domino."

"That does not alter the fact. Besides, the only amusement is not to be known in such a case, and you and your cousin and Miss Beecham would all know me; if I go, I shall go alone."

"Do not be afraid of Gerard—he never notices anything. I never saw any one so changed as he is. His illness may of course have altered him a



little, but I never saw any one so completely changed."

"How do you mean?"

"He is silent, irritable, gloomy; he used to be so light-hearted and gay."

"And you attribute it to——?"

"I scarcely know what to attribute it to; he is of course unhappy about his wife."

"Why?"

"They did not hit it. I do not know—I will not judge who was in fault; but, at all events, they were not suited."

"Can nothing be done?"

"He talks like a ruined, hopeless man. It seems very hard."

"Do you think that the fact of his having a wife is the sole cause?"

"I know of nothing else irretrievable."

"But that might not be irretrievable." Cordelia was glad to hurt herself by speaking in this way.

"How can it be otherwise? He is married to a woman he does not love."

"After all, what is it?" she said. "A man takes a fancy to a woman; he marries her, gets tired of her in three months, and abandons her. But, even then, she is too great a tie; it is a pity not to loosen it altogether. Does it ever occur to you, Mr. Clayre, what your cousin's wife may feel on the subject."



"No," said Norton, innocently; "I have never seen her, nor do I know anything of her; it is enough for me that she makes or has made him unhappy, for me to feel a prejudice, perhaps an unjust one, against her."

"Of course."

"I am told the Princess Bifrons, at one time, used to like him—I cannot speak positively—and Gerard admires her exceedingly. Life seems to me so at cross-purposes lately. I have enjoyed more, thought more, felt more, than I ever did before, and yet I have never had such unhappy moments, and every one seems the same. Gerard is more unhappy, I think, than I am and you—oh! what have I said!"

Cordelia's tears fell fast at these last words. She could not have controlled herself.

"I am very foolish," she said, trying to dry her eyes, "after all. While I have my art I never can be quite unhappy."

"And I while I can see you," muttered Norton, rising to go.

He went away, for he felt he might offend her if his thoughts took that direction.

Cordelia dried her tears, and made up her mind to go to the veglione. "I will confront them, she thought, and, face to face, I will tell them how I despise them."



CHAPTER XI.

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THAT evening Gerard and Norton escorted Mrs. Beecham and her daughter, closely masked, to the theatre.

They had a large box in the Ordine Nobile, and it was certainly a very pretty gay sight as they entered.

The boxes were filled from ceiling to floor. Many of their occupants were in costume, and large parties were assembled together in the different boxes, prepared to descend on the stage for a little amusement, and then to return to their own boxes. The music had commenced, and the dancing was in its first somewhat shy, somewhat formal, phase.

The motley throng of Pierrots, Debardeurs, Harlequins, swayed to and fro, and pressed under particular boxes where any unmasked beauty attracted particular attention.

Single masks glided about and attached themselves to parties, or to other single masks, and a lively, brisk dialogue was carried on, or else the eternal "E lei" was screeched out in the



masque voice. Sometimes, where there had been much knowledge of gossip and private history, some hits were made; but it required having been behind the scenes a long time to succeed in this. Some Englishwomen, irreproachably masked, fluttered together like coy ravens, but evidently entirely incapable of entering into the spirit of the thing.

In a box almost opposite to the one which Norton had taken sat the Princess Bifrons. She was dressed in her usual costume, black, with the white net folds round her face. She was observing the opposite box with great attention. Mrs. Beecham and Miss Beecham were both masked. Gerard and Norton looked strikingly alike as they stood side by side in the brilliant light. But Norton's face was flushed and his eyes were bright. Gerard looked pale and more abstracted than usual.

Once or twice the attention of the Princess was attracted by a single mask, who (in a domino which completely concealed her, so long in the skirt, and so loose in the sleeves that there was not the faintest outline of the figure to be recognised) stood not far from the entrance, and remained standing alone watching her box, as it appeared. But whether the notice she attracted was unpleasant, or that she was only waiting for some one whom she subsequently joined, the



Princess missed her suddenly, and could trace her no more.

As the clock struck twelve the Princess bade adieu to the friends she had invited, and left the theatre.

"It is strange," said Miss Beecham to Gerard, as he escorted her through the theatre, "often as I have been to the veglione, it is impossible for me to enter into its spirit. I cannot disguise my voice, and the fact of wearing a mask makes me feel much more shy than when I speak with an uncovered face."

Gerard smiled. "It is a deficiency I can understand, and I suppose the Anglo-Saxon blood which flows in your veins justifies itself in that. We English are especially incapable of that ready wit, or that pliancy in adopting a character at a moment's notice which can alone make such amusements thoroughly amusing."

"I suppose it is so; as a spectator I admire it; music, lights, the magnetism there is in masses who are giving or attempting gaiety, all makes it a gay and pleasurable scene to me, but I never feel how entirely I am a spectator in the drama of life, so much as here."

The crowd was so great at certain parts, that they could with difficulty keep together, and were jostled every minute. Some masks were pushed up against them so closely that they all seemed



to form one party; and one, evidently a man, from his height, whispered something in Miss Beecham's ear.

In the confusion Gerard could not tell how it was she left his arm, and took that of the person who spoke. His own was instantly taken by another mask, and they were pushed on out of the principal dancing-room into one of the others, in which the inferior crowd seem to take their places by preference. This preference may have been caused by its proximity to the refreshment room.

The mirth was now culminating to its fast and furious point, and the two silent ones in the festival seemed to understand by a rare sympathy that quiet and silence were best for them. They neither spoke.

At last Gerard said, "I am afraid you will feel the heat very much; perhaps we had best return to our own box. You can, at all events, unmask there, and you will find it cooler than here." They accordingly made their way slowly along. An incident occurred which slightly puzzled Gerard. One of the masks who followed was rather obtrusive in keeping beside them, and kept pouring questions and remarks to his companion. He was not surprised she was silent, but as this person came nearer and once extended his or her hand in the energy of conversation almost on her



shoulder, his companion pressed close to him, and he felt the small fingers fluttering on his arm in a way which showed how she recognised his power of protecting her, but unlike what would have been Miss Beecham's stately self-possessed appeal on such an emergency. The touch of those fingers sent a strange thrill through him.

But before they reached the box the crowd separated them. Gerard thought he had lost her; but, as he entered, she, or some one masked precisely as she was, entered too. Mrs. Beecham and Norton were absent.

They sat down, and Gerard said, "Will you untie your mask."

"No." The voice was a muffled, peculiar one. He recognised no familiar accent; it was evidently disguised.

"There is some mistake, I think."

"None," said the mask; "I wish to speak to you, and have found you. Will you shut the door, or no; draw the curtain, for the heat is too great. Gerard obeyed. He drew the curtains together in the middle, and did not notice that in the aperture, between the right hand one and the wall, another domino stood, watching them.

"You wish to speak to me," he said.

"Yes, to you."

"What can any one, a perfect stranger, for I



know no one in Florence, have to say to me, to Gerard Clayre ? ”

“ Perhaps you are less a stranger than you think. Besides, you cannot tell ; there may be persons who have recognised you, though you have not recognised them.”

“ Impossible.”

“ Have you no remembrance of any former acquaintances—connections—who might possibly be in Florence ? ”

“ None but the lady who is in the opposite box—who was, I should say, for she is gone.”

“ I can, however, prove to you that I know you.”

“ Prove it.”

“ Do you really wish it.”

Gerard paused ; he was getting tired of this mystification. He had an idea that this might be Cordelia, yet it was impossible. The height was the same ; and the figure was so concealed, the features were so closely masked, that nothing could be seen by which he could detect or prove that it was or was not his wife ; but the bearing was unlike hers.

“ You may know me, because you may have heard certain facts of my history ; but that is no reason why I should know you.”

“ Perhaps I am wrong in saying that I do know



you. I never did know you—nor did you ever know me.”

“Well, then?”

“That is of slight importance—but I know some one else—I know your wife.”

“My wife?”

“Yes, if the name of wife can be given to one who is bereaved of every real claim to that title.”

“If you know her, you may know that the fault of this does not rest with me.”

“Indeed?”

“Did she tell you?”

“No matter, it is not of the past I wished to tell you, but of the future.”

“Why?”

“Is the tie between you indissoluble? In your country a wife can be divorced.”

“Does she seek her freedom?”

At this point the curtains were flung back, and a number of masks rushed in. Gerard stamped with impatience at this interruption, but there was no help for it. There was a brisk conversation kept up between the masks who entered and the mask who had been conversing with him. Could it be Cordelia, who, in the very passion of such emotion as she must have felt when she spoke to him, could talk and jest with such bitter levity? True, there was no recognising an inflection of her voice, but the voice was evidently disguised. He



was thoroughly provoked, and would have left the box at once ; but his move of departure was the signal of the escape of all—they rushed by him like a whirlwind, dragging, as he thought, the mask, who had been his companion, with them. But no, even as he paused undecided, whether he should wait for Norton or leave the theatre at once, his arm was taken by the same black figure ; he was drawn into the box again, the door was shut, but this time the key, which was inside, was turned in the lock.

The mask then sat down, apparently breathless and exhausted. She did not speak at once. How strange it was that, though to the very rosette on her sleeve she appeared the same, he had a mysterious conviction that it was another, and the same who had at first addressed him. “What did you say of your wife?” she began, almost in a whisper.

“Then it is the same.” Gerard felt his anger redoubled.

“Go on with what you said.” Here an unguarded movement betrayed Cordelia. She had a way of turning back her hands as she held them out in any passionate entreaty, which Gerard felt no woman but she could have. Yet there was still a doubt, and he pressed his lips together, resolved not to betray his suspicion, but play the game out.

“You spoke of freedom—that I shall never re-



gain. Who can free me from the past? Can she place me at that point of life where I stood when I first knew her? Tell her—but has she told you all?—do you know our story?”

“I know that she has been wronged.”

“Wronged! and have I not been wronged?”

“Recrimination is idle; yet I know that, after she had given you her whole heart, she found—no matter.”

In the brilliant light which flooded the whole theatre one might have seen a painful blush crimson Gerard's usually pale face.

“She was young, ardent, devoted, but the whole cup was poured out upon the sands. It is empty now.”

“Was that all?—but she—Did she not know she had deceived me? There was a Frenchman——”

“Do not speak of him,” said a low, choked voice.

“A man who always was between me and my wife; a man whom she honoured, obeyed, loved! I tell you I found, in her father's own writing, how much she had loved this man. When I think how I loved her, how I worshipped her, how it seemed to me that, to have won her love I would have died a thousand deaths, and that one day I overheard a conversation between her and this man, in which *he*, the scoundrel, was persuading *her* to remain with *me*—I could kill her. Yes, I saw her—my wife—throw herself on her knees before this man, and assure him that nothing would induce her to



stay with me, and imploring him to take her with him. Does she deny this?" Gerard clasped the arm which was stretched out towards him in mute appeal, like a vice. "Dares she deny it?"

The mask staggered back as if she had been shot, but she recovered herself: "It is true, that when she discovered that the love for which she had been content to forego all the cherished aims of her life, was a simulated feeling, and that another could claim it, that she——"

"But all you say is false. What other—who?"

"Dare you deny it?"

"I deny everything, but that I was a besotted fool."

The mask turned away with unutterable scorn.

Gerard broke in with an oath. "What was that man to her? answer me."

"Beset on every side, is it surprising that your wife should have wished to escape from the husband who had so outraged her—from the family who scorned her—from the father who justly resented on her the position in which she had placed him? She wished to fly in a time of uncontrolled grief, but she did not do so. She was content to let the separation appear unavoidable, caused by her health—not choice."

"Was he not her lover?"

"Lover! The man who had been her friend, her guide, her all but parent; the man whose arm



was ever held out to protect and shelter her—in whose sincere affection alone she could take refuge from the sorrows heaped upon her on all sides—and whom she valued, revered—yes, and loved—more than all the world beside—a man whom you, Gerard Clayre, and such as you, are not worthy to name.”

Cordelia snatched off her mask and stood pale with indignation, but beautiful as a Medusa, before her husband.

“I should have known,” he answered, with a pride and passion equal to her own, “that but one person could so speak of him.”

He bowed haughtily, as he turned from her, and then, as if on second thoughts, turned round and spoke :—

“Be it so, as you said before, recrimination is idle ; of the past we will not speak ; but as you are here, and we are alone, let me make one last appeal to——”

“What ?”

“Your sense of right.”

“What for ? Shall I tell you ? You think that it is not fitting for your wife to be a public singer ; you think the name of Clayre would be sullied, should it be known that on these Italian boards one who bore it had stood up to receive applause. Is it not so ?”

“You are right. You bear my name, you have



a claim on my home ; leave the stage, return to it, and——”

“ And what have you to offer me in exchange for independence, success, fame ? ”

She fixed her eyes piercingly on him. With those eyes bent on him and reading his very soul, Gerard could not speak the word forgiveness as he had intended ; nor would his pride, stubborn and defiant as her own, permit him to use the word which was in reality deep in his heart—Love, love, in spite of all, and for ever. He paused.

“ You do not speak ; thank you for not forswearing yourself ; then shall I tell you my determination ? ”

“ Leave the stage, swear you will never see——”

She interrupted him vehemently. “ I will never leave the stage till I have fulfilled——”

“ Spare yourself and spare me,” said Gerard, in a hollow voice ; “ there needs no more, we are parted for ever.”

Even while they had been talking there had been knock after knock at the door, utterly disregarded by them ; but now Gerard heard Norton’s voice, in a sharp, husky tone, demanding admittance. He opened it, and saw some one masked like Cordelia flitting down the corridor. Norton staggered in.

“ You were talking with—the Princess told me—she kept me outside. Oh, my God ! but



where is she? I was standing there when she met me, and told me—Gerard, where is she?”

“Who?”

“Miss Ashton! — No no. The Princess said——”

“Sit down, Norton; you are over-fatigued.”

Norton's body swayed to and fro, as in fever. Gerard looked at him with a dreadful fear; but after a few minutes Norton recovered himself, and rising, quickly said, “I think I will go home.”

At this moment Mrs. Beecham, leaving her friends outside the box, entered. Norton turned round at the door, and spoke, impatiently, for him. “Will you, Gerard, remain with Mrs. Beecham? I will send back the carriage for you.”

“I am so sorry to detain you,” said Mrs. Beecham; “but I cannot go home without Mabel.”

“Could you not rest here,” said Gerard to his cousin, for he did not relish the idea of a *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Beecham.

“No,” said Norton; “I feel so strangely tired, I must get home.”

Gerard was so agitated himself, and his first fear about his cousin having passed away as he saw him apparently recovered from his momentary faintness, he did not notice his strange manner. He did not, therefore, follow him. How he reproached himself for this afterwards.



Norton moved slowly and hesitatingly on through the crowds, looking neither to the right nor to the left, and deaf to the whispered voices which called him, and insensible to the touch of the hands which were lightly placed on his to attract him again to the throng. He paused several times and leaned against the wall, but succeeded at last in reaching the foot of the staircase.

Here there was a great crowd, from which he could with difficulty extricate himself; and here he stood for a minute to rest, when suddenly he thought he heard his name called. He trembled from head to foot for he recognised the voice.

Meanwhile Cordelia, when she rushed out of the box, had been stopped by a woman masked like herself, who was standing outside. The woman spoke—

“I am glad to have interrupted your conference at last; had I not told that young man that his cousin and his cousin’s wife, the divine singer, La Signora Corda, were having a matrimonial discussion in there, you would have remained all night, I think; but he was more eager then to interrupt you than even I was. I am afraid, poor fellow, the intelligence was a shock, but extreme cases require extreme measures.”



"I am glad to have met you. Who are you, to interfere between my husband and me, as you have always done?"

"You know me! Then you know a friend."

"Friend? You mean enemy."

"You had better add this date to your bracelet—the *final* one."

"Bracelet! Was it you?"

"Yes. I have never lost sight of you since we parted at Naples. Do you know me now? I will *never* lose sight of you. Shall I unmask, or do you recognise me?"

Cordelia was silent; but she drew her companion beneath one of the lamps under the corridor.

"You need not unmask," she said; "I know you. Why do you hate me, Princess Bifrons?"

She was still trembling with the indignation which her scene with Gerard had aroused.

"Hate you! I am your friend. Did I not warn you against Gerard Clayre? Was I not right? See what misery he has brought on you! I have never lost sight of you since that day at Naples—at the Ferry, in Milan, Siena, Florence, I have watched you. I shall always do so."

"I do not acknowledge you as a friend. What motive you have had in your evil work I scorn to penetrate; but if, as I sometimes suspect, you have deceived me——"



"How could I deceive you? His own letter to me, is in your hands."

"If you have wound a coil so artfully round us that we cannot disentangle it, and that we cannot prove you the false woman I believe you——"

"What will you do? Do you know secrets of mine? Will you betray me?"

Had any eyes penetrated the mask of the Princess, they would have seen that she turned pale. Cordelia's fine ear detected the emotion in that usually smooth even tone; and the look in those pale eyes glistening through the velvet apertures, told her how the Princess feared her. Yes, feared her with a mortal and abject fear. Cordelia saw it, and a revulsion of feeling changed her at once. She held her enemy's hands tightly for a moment's space, and in a voice, altered from its indignant sternness to a piercing sweetness, said—

"I do know your secrets; how I pity you!"

She flung the hands back, and passed on.

The Princess looked after her. Corrupt as she was by education, certain fibres in her nature could admire this magnanimity, though it could not alter her purpose.

"*C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre,*" at least among women. After all, it is a weak nature which is incapable of revenge. I hold the worst cards, but I have won the game so far."



Cordelia tried to find her way out, and replaced her mask ; but she was so beset by the throng, that she was quite hemmed in. At last she saw a slight figure and pale face a little in advance, and recognised Norton. She called him, and as he turned round, addressed him :—

“ Will you give me your arm for a moment ? I am leaving.”

“ Good Heavens, is it you ? Once more, once more,” he muttered.

“ Yes ; I came with the rest of the foolish people.” Cordelia’s voice was harsh, and totally changed.

They walked together till, at the corner of the street, they found the carriage.

“ Thank you. I can get on now,” said Cordelia, “ for I can easily find a fiacre.”

“ Do not think of it ; come in.” Norton leaned against the carriage-door as he held it open.

Cordelia looked up. There was something in his face, as the lamplight fell on it, which decided her.

“ You seem quite ill,” she said, and got in.

The moment they were in, and the carriage had driven on, Norton sank back in the corner as if fainting, but Cordelia saw that it was more like suffocation. He put his handkerchief to his mouth—it was full of blood.



"Take me home," he said, faintly, holding her hand tightly in one of his own.

Cordelia gave the orders, and in a short time they reached his house. She would not leave him, but gave directions to the servant who helped him upstairs; and then sent him first for the physician, and afterwards to fetch the Beechams and his cousin. He was laid on the bed, and after some restoratives, which she applied with care and skill, he revived.

"Tell me," he said, as he opened his eyes, and fixed them earnestly on her.—"I was told there by the Princess that—that—Is it true? Are you Gerard's wife?"

"I am."

He could not grow more pale, but his lip quivered.

"I am glad to die," he murmured, and closed his eyes again.

She trembled very much, but took his hand gently in hers.

"I would have told you, but I wished to remain entirely separated from all the past. I would not cling to it even by a name. Forgive me, if to know this is pain to you, but it makes me belong to you, in a degree, dear Norton."

"Not more pain to me, for, married or single, you were hopelessly cut off from me; but more pain when I think that this is life. You, Gerard,



both so dear, so good—and yet irrevocably parted ! Why are such separations—why are such sorrows ? It is very bitter.’

“ But now, you see, I have a right to be with you and take care of you.” She smiled—a sad wintry smile. At that moment the carriage returned, and Gerard hastened into the room. His face looked livid, as he recognised Cordelia ; but he was silent.

“ My dear Norton, why did not you tell me ? I would have come at once and left Mrs. Beecham in some other person’s care.”

“ I am better now—it may pass away.”

Here the doctor entered, and they left him for a minute or two. When they returned, the doctor drew Gerard aside, and spoke a few words to him in a grave voice.

Cordelia seated herself by his side.

“ Stay with me,” he whispered, in a childish tone of entreaty ; “ I will not keep you long.”

The physician overheard him. “ If you *could* stay, it would be best, if he wishes it.”

“ I will,” said Cordelia ; but she involuntarily turned to Gerard for permission. He was obstinate in not looking towards her.

Norton heard the doctor’s fiat, and drew Cordelia’s hand close in his.

She consented to remain, and did not leave Norton’s bedside till the end.



Who knows but that that brief period, vouchsafed to him at the last, was not as full of happiness, in its exquisite joy, as the felicities which are scattered over the long lives of other men? The mother he had never known, the sister he had pined for, the faint vision of love which had risen before the timid, childlike youth were represented in their tenderest, most sympathetic aspect by the woman who was to him the One. There was fulness at last for him, so long doomed to loneliness and neglect.

Gerard was devoted to him. He had always loved Norton, and Gerard's heart was so softened by illness and suffering, that its best qualities manifested themselves in soothing the illness and suffering of another. Norton would look at him wistfully, but said little.

Mrs. Beecham did not know what had taken place; but she wrote to Mrs. Watson that Norton's heart had been broken by the Signora Corda, whose real name was Clayre. She was the wife of Mr. Gerard Clayre.



## CHAPTER XII.

DURING these last days Norton made one or two little requests to Gerard. He would say, quite calmly—

“When the Court is yours, Gerard, I wish you would do” so-and-so. There was a place where a favourite dog had been buried; he wished a tree to be planted there, and he wanted a memorial window in the Church to be dedicated to his mother. Her name was Margaret. He also (having attained his majority) drew three thousand pounds, in one bill, placed the bill in an envelope and addressed it himself to Cordelia, but did not show it to her.

Seven nights afterwards, at the same hour when he had been taken ill at the Pergola, his voice grew husky, and his lids heavy as with sleep.

“I must rest now,” he said; “give me your hand, dear.” He turned to Cordelia, and he pressed it to his lips.

He then looked hard at Gerard, who was standing, with folded arms, on the other side of the bed:—



"Gerard, I like to think of you at the Court——"

"I shall never live there, Norton. I shall return to India——"

"No, no ; it makes me happier to think of you there ; and you, too," he added, turning to Cordelia.

She started, and almost drew away her hand from his.

"Give me your hand, Gerard," said Norton.

Gerard gave it mechanically, and Norton clasped it, and then put it over Cordelia's. Both hands were hot as with fever ; his own rested lightly and coldly on them.

"All will be well one day, I know it will," he said ; "and then remember, I said it would, and that I loved you both dearly, dearly."

His eyes smiled as they rested on Cordelia's tearful face ; but the mouth already wore that strange, hushed, breathless stillness which is the harbinger of death.

The two watchers never knew how long it was, but, after awhile, the moist fingers relaxed and fell ; and Cordelia, as she stooped over him, saw it was all over. She kissed his forehead and envied its chill and calm repose.

She unconsciously looked round for Gerard. He was leaning against the bed, his head buried in the pillow. Why did not Cordelia obey the



instinct which would have led her to his side? Had she done so, how much sorrow she would have been spared! She checked herself, and went out of the room.

A carriage was sent for, and she went home.

The sombre shadow of the Cathedral was over one side of the Piazza, the other lay white and bare in the moonlight, which shone like an illumination through the Campanile.

"Norton's life, now, is like that," she thought, "all peace and light; ours is in the darkness, with a vast shadow thrown over it."

She went home—seven days—what a period it seemed—since she had sat in that room! Where was all the rage, the hatred, the contempt that had filled her heart as she sat there? All was gone, all was over! Norton's deathbed had revived in her heart lessons which had for a brief space, of almost intolerable provocation, been forgotten. How could she judge others? She who was herself so impatient, so unforgiving. There was her besetting sin—so keenly sensitive to injury, so instantly resolved to act on the immediate anger of the moment.

She found some letters waiting for her. These letters added to her regrets. One was from M. Corsand. In it he told her he was obliged to leave Paris for Algiers, on a mission connected with the benevolent objects which always occupied

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him, and he would not return for at least a year. She could send her letters to the usual address in Paris, and they would be forwarded to him. He told her of Aunt Anne's death, and of the strange proviso made by her with regard to Ivy.

Cordelia understood at once the reason of this. Gerard's marriage had prejudiced his aunt against him to such an extent, that she did not think he could be trusted with the care of his sister. Ivy's heavy disappointment, and the pain she would endure as an inmate of Sir Arthur's uncongenial home were, Cordelia felt, as much her work as if she had been the direct instrument instead of the indirect one.

It was all bitter and wretched to think of, and the sense that she had rejected some compromise which might have given a new colouring to her fate, was, perhaps, the hardest of all. M. Corsand also told her, that at Milan, a relative of his, lately married, would claim her acquaintance for his sake; and that he hoped that both husband and wife would be able to serve her and assist her.

The next day, Liesa came down to see her.

The poor girl had sufficient penetration to see that Cordelia was suffering, and she was anxious, in her brusque, affectionate way, to console her. But in the course of conversation, she unconsciously spoke of much that cauterised the pain.



Her grief, when she saw that Cordelia was making preparations for her departure, was extreme.

Cordelia asked her to go with her to Milan, but Liesa told her that having herself expressed to the Princess a desire to accompany her friend, the Princess had said " 'Go if you like, but not at my expense.' She knew," added Liesa, "I had no money of my own, and that of course I would not be a burden on you." She then said that she was to stay in Florence some time longer, and then go on to Paris.

"The Princess is going to Vienna. She has given me the means to go to Paris, and for six months' study. After that, she says I must provide for myself, which I shall be only too glad to do."

"And with your voice, Liesa, you will be soon able to do so."

"I hope so ; *mais je suis bien seule, allez ;*" and the tears came to the usually laughing eyes.

"Write to me Liesa, you will find I shall always be your friend. Here is my address at Milan. I am going to fulfil my engagement there now. And if I leave Milan, here is an address in London, which will find me always, and should you want anything, let me know."

"I will."

"But, of course, your friend will take care of you !"



“I do not know ; she seems tired of me. Had I been pretty, or accomplished in any way besides my singing, I think she would have been glad ; but as it is, I seem a burden that she would willingly throw aside. I wish I knew what first made her take charge of me, but I cannot remember so far back ; no matter, I do not care ; if I have health, and my voice lasts, I shall be able to stand alone, without any patroness ; but let me be with you as much as you can till you go ?”

Cordelia felt an inexpressible comfort in the poor girl's affection, and Liesa was inseparable from her during these last days. There are certain chords in a woman's heart which only a woman can touch, and Liesa was true to her sex in this power of giving solace to another woman.

She heard that Gerard had left Florence. Her engagement was over at Florence, and she resolved to leave it. She had still much to achieve to fulfil her intention of paying the sum she intended to her father ; and she smiled bitterly to herself, when she thought that the only prospect she could recognise distinctly in her future, was the exertion necessary to make up that sum.

As she sat packing she was surprised to receive a large parcel addressed to her in Gerard's handwriting. On opening Norton's papers, a letter was found, addressed to Gerard, requesting him



to see that a bill for three thousand pounds, which was money he inherited from his own family, should be given to Cordelia. He had survived his twenty-first birthday one fortnight.

She wrote some preliminary directions to a lawyer, and told him to send his answer to Milan, where she had been engaged soon after her *début* at the Pergola.

She felt now that, come what might, she could repair the wrong done to Sarah.

Meanwhile, she placed everything in order so as to do it. But, with a delicacy peculiarly her own, she so arranged it, that Mr. Ashley should think the repayment of the money was Gerard's act. With the proceeds of her engagement she paid the debt she owed M. Corsand. Cordelia was now relieved from the great anxiety she had had, but was not happier. She seemed more lonely now that she had nothing to work for.

She felt that the alienation between her and her husband was final.

At four-and-twenty she was alone; and yet life was rich in the heart's best ties for her, though necessity kept her aloof from all. She felt that on herself alone she must depend for the future, and did not shrink from the task. Cordelia had suffered, but she had not been broken up by the great waters of sorrow—pride was not yet crushed out of her.



The memories which clung to this brief period of trial at Florence were sadly endeared to her by the recollection of Norton. Cordelia had no morbid regrets about him. She was glad she had known him, and had been able to be of some comfort to him. Unconsciously she had given him pain, but she had more than compensated for that pain. He had been more taken care of, more soothed, more loved, during the last weeks of his life, than he had ever been before. She mourned his death as she would that of a dear brother, but there was no bitterness in the tears she shed for him.

She had so many sorrows, keener, more envenomed, to mourn over, that there was a relief in thinking of him. He had escaped it all, and was at peace, as she longed to be.

The only other thing which was a solace to her to think of, was her art. With it she was wrapped, as in invincible armour, against the cold, cruel world. It had been faithful to her, and had bestowed an aim, a success, a consolation on her ; she would be loyal to it until the end.

Just before she left she had a visit from Miss Beecham. Miss Beecham was animated. All was prospering to her heart's content. Those who fasten their hopes on a public cause may not know intimate joys, but are spared heart-wringing griefs. Cruel disappointments may occur



as to the date of certain manifestations of progress, but over nature, and over humanity, is spread the same Eternal Hand which draws them onward towards the same goal of perfection ; and though there may seem a pause, or even a retrograde movement, a truly intelligent eye can always discern that, "*pur si muove.*"

After conversing on these subjects, Miss Beecham suddenly turned to Cordelia, and said : "I am afraid that some friends of mine annoyed you, the other night, at the masked ball."

"Friends of yours !" said Cordelia, faintly.

"Was it not you who were with Mr. Gerard Clayre, when several masks entered the box ? They said it was the Princess Bifrons ; but when I saw you at the door, when you accompanied poor Mr. Clayre, I saw the domino and mask were precisely like those they had pointed out to me from below when they went to invade the box."

"No ; I was standing near it when they entered. It *was* the Princess !"

"You know, or may have heard, she was a great liberal once, and really acted well in '48, but for the last few years she has become a most determined retrograde, and has caused mischief ; and some of her ancient allies, now enemies, were not sorry to take advantage of the moment to tell her a few truths. Some of the hints they gave her



have obliged her to leave Florence. She combines the greatest ostentation of religious observances with the most heartless abandonment of a woman's first duties, and fears nothing so much as being found out."

Cordelia blushed scarlet, for she knew to what Miss Beecham alluded, though they were both silent. But, besides kindness to Cordelia, Miss Beecham's visit had another motive. There were sounds of war in the North, and every Italian who could leave family and home, was hastening to Piedmont. The anxiety of poor Carlo to serve his country—his grief at parting with Cordelia—caused him a great struggle. With the quickness of his country, he had seen how much she had suffered within the last few weeks, and he felt it was not a time to leave her. An Italian servant always identifies himself, more or less, with his *padrone* or *padrona*. But there was also the strong desire of serving that which was dearer to him than anything in the world. As soon as Cordelia heard from Miss Beecham the hope held out to him, she called him to her, and bade him go. It was his duty, and he must obey it. After some hesitation, he consented; but made Cordelia promise that, if he was alive at the end of the campaign, she would allow him to return to her. With this promise, he left Florence at once.



And now the end had come.

"Do not forget me," said Liesa, as they parted.

"Never, Liesa ; and remember, if you need me, write ; I will come to you, wherever you are."

"I will remember."

Perhaps, after all her triumphant success, the most pleasant recollection, and the only one which soothed her amid her griefs, was the sense that she had been a friend to this poor deserted girl.







## BOOK VI.

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### CHAPTER I.

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IT was the day that Ivy was expected at Clayre Court. A cold day towards the end of January. Lady Clayre rather congratulated herself on the arrangements by which she had obviated making the charge of Ivy a too expensive one. She awaited her arrival therefore with somewhat more equanimity than she would otherwise have done.

Lady Clayre was a woman who ought to have been placed on the lowest step of the social scale. There the sordidness of her nature might have been utilised. As it was, her mean, grasping, covetous inclinations were indulged in, but with a sense of shame, which did not weaken them, but gave them the morbid character of secret sin. She was ashamed of herself sometimes, and sought to conceal her real motives under the most plausible ones; but no one was long deceived, and her real character was soon under-



stood. People despised her the more for the attempt at deception.

She was hard and cold, even towards her children, for whom she saved and screwed in this odious manner. Her notion of being a good mother was limited to this one duty—saving money for her children. The fulfilment of this exonerated her from all others.

She was entirely indifferent to her husband; and though she had, of course, perfectly well known that he had been married previously and had had sons, both of whom had married and had children, she seemed year after year to think of it as a greater wrong. She accustomed herself to talk and think of her children as “sacrificed,” and felt a proportionate hatred towards those she deemed the usurpers.

First in her dear hate was Norton, then Gerard, then Ivy.

To mere passers by, who did not suffer from her avarice, there was something very ludicrous in her attempts at mystifying others. She would speak of the bad taste of a profusely-supplied dinner-table, and would leave it to be inferred that her meagre repasts were in accordance with the highest refinement. Or she would talk of the sin of spending money foolishly on dress when there were so many other ways of spending it profitably, as if her own shabbiness of costume



and her children's miserable appearance were the effect of the loftiest principle. Frank was not quite such a victim to his mother's economy as the little girls; for Sir Arthur took more notice of his son, and insisted that he should be made presentable, but the girls he left entirely to the mother. To Sir Arthur, who had a fetish worship for his name, beings who, in the course of time, would probably give up the name of Clayre, were not very interesting; but boys, who, till they died, must bear that name, were of far more value; and his influence always produced a more lavish expenditure on them. But to those who were belonging to her household, and who really suffered from this parsimony, all sense of her absurdity was merged in the odious privations she inflicted.

When Sir Arthur wrote to her that Ivy was coming down with him, her indignation knew no bounds; but, after a time, this subsided, for the idea entered her mind that the governess who taught her girls was expensive, and that this would be an opportunity of retrenching that item in the family expenses. Thirty pounds a year! The inspiration was providential. She wrote to Sir Arthur, and, in a carefully-worded letter, suggested this idea to him. Sir Arthur was entirely selfish, but not mean. He had the habits of wealth, though devoid of all generosity



of soul. He would never have given away, from kindness of heart, a sixpence, but on all *his* belongings money was spent freely. To propose to him "*de but en blanc*," that *his* granddaughter should become a governess would have been folly, but in the manner it was presented to his mind by his wife there was nothing derogatory to his sense of dignity. He thought occupation would keep Ivy out of mischief, and he distrusted her. She was so unlike all the women he had ever known. His sister's gentle insipidity was not more unlike Ivy than his wife's calculating hardness. All that Sir Arthur did not understand he did not like, and he certainly did not like Ivy; what was more, he was a little afraid of her.

When they arrived at Clayre it was late and quite dark. The carriage, which met them at the station, drove to a side door, and nothing of the position or surroundings of the house could be seen. They crossed the hall, and entered a small morning room, in which they found Lady Clayre, her two girls, and her little boy.

"What a miserable fire," said Sir Arthur, ringing for more coals and taking his position on the rug. "Come nearer to the fire, Ivy; you must be frozen."

The children were staring at their new relative, and wondering at her deep mourning.

"Have you dined?" asked Lady Clayre.



"Dined? No. Have you got nothing for us to eat?"

"I told them to prepare something with the tea."

"Let them make haste then."

"I will take off my wraps," said Ivy; and turning to one of the children, she said kindly, "Will you show me where I am to sleep?"

The little girl hung back, and looked at her mamma.

"Go with Ivy," said Lady Clayre.

There was a broad flight of stairs, but the little girl passed it and said, "We never go up the great staircase," and, passing through some passages, led the way up a narrower, steeper, uncarpeted flight, till they came to the bedrooms.

"This is our room," said the child.

It was a large, bare room with two beds in it—one large one and one smaller one; the smaller one was in a kind of alcove, and some scanty greenbaize curtains partitioned it off from the rest of the room.

All was chillingly neat and cold and comfortless.

"You are to sleep there," said Ellen Clayre, pointing to the smaller bed; "Annie and I sleep together in this bed."

"I think there must be a mistake," said Ivy.



"No; our governess used to sleep there, and you are to teach us now. Frank still sleeps in the same room as Fraser, our nurse and mamma's maid."

"But are there no other bed-rooms?"

"None on this side; upstairs there are a great many; but the servants sleep upstairs."

Ivy was silent. It was disagreeable to have a struggle on the first evening of her arrival, but she felt that life would be intolerable if she had no nook or corner she could call her own. She wished that all should go smoothly during her stay, but she had not contemplated such a want of hospitality as this. Sir Arthur had told her, in an off hand way, that she would not be dull; for he hoped she would be interested in the children, poor things, and teach them a little by way of amusement. Ivy understood him perfectly, but she had no objection to do so.

When she went down, she found that tea was prepared, and went into the dining-room with the others.

There was tea at one end of the table and some cold viands at the other. Sir Arthur called her, and she took her seat by him.

"Are you not afraid of eating meat late at night?" asked Lady Clayre, in a tone which betrayed she expected an affirmative.

"O no," answered Ivy, with a smile. "I am



very hungry, and have had no dinner, and I feel as if I could eat meat, or anything else I can get."

Lady Clayre pinched up her lips till they looked like a mere line in her face, but was silent.

Sir Arthur was silent; he was hungry and cold, and thinking of various things he intended doing.

Lady Clayre shortened the meal as much as possible at her end of the table and then rose; but Ivy so calmly continued hers, with evidently no intention of leaving it till she was satisfied, that Lady Clayre reseated herself.

When Sir Arthur had finished, they all left, and the children went upstairs to bed.

"If you are tired, Ivy, do not sit up."

"Thank you," she said, "but I wished to tell you that I am not accustomed to sleep in the same room with others. I should not sleep, and I should be quite disabled from doing anything the next day. If it is impossible for me to have a room to myself, I must go."

Sir Arthur stared at her for a moment.

"To be sure—arrange all that with Lady Clayre. I am very tired, and am off to bed."

Lady Clayre and Ivy were left alone. Both were standing, but Ivy slid into a chair. Her heart beat a little, and she thought she could control her voice better, seated. Lady Clayre



looked at her. She was intelligent enough to see that Ivy was as firm as she was good-natured. Yet a good many minor economies depended on this one bedroom, and she must make a stand at once.

"I should have thought, Ivy, everything considered, that the room my own girls sleep in might do for you."

"I am sure, if you knew how essential it is to me, and how incapable I should be of fulfilling your wishes—for Sir Arthur told me you wished me to take the place of the governess who has left" (Ivy wished Lady Clayre to know that she was aware of the plan), "if my night's rest were disturbed, you would see that it is an absolute necessity that I should have a room to myself. I require no carpet, no curtains to bed or window; it can make no difference to you, and is everything to me."

Lady Clayre moved majestically to the bell. "You are very pertinacious, Ivy, but it is not my wish to have difficulties at the very beginning of our living together. John, tell Fraser to remove Miss Clayre's sheets and other things to the east bed-room on the second story. You can tell us when it is all done."

The servant came to say it was ready, and, after a cold "Good night," the ladies separated.

The room where Ivy was to sleep was just



above the one into which she had been first shown. At a glance Ivy saw it had capabilities, and could be made comfortable. There were two windows in it, but she could see nothing, though she opened the shutters, for it was a moonless night. When Ivy laid her head on the pillow, it was with an excited feeling rather than a melancholy one ; and yet it seemed hard work to look forward to a battle every time she sought the least concession from Lady Clayre. The sense of victory obtained in this first struggle could not compensate for this anticipation.

In the morning her first impulse led her to look out of the window. It was a frosty morning, and the trees sparkled in the sunshine. Though the season of the year was so different, Ivy was carried back in thought to the day she arrived at the Ferry. There was the same sense of novelty and beauty. The contrast, however, of the two rooms was a sad one.

At nine o'clock the breakfast-bell rang. At this meal all the family assembled together, and, as it was presided over by Sir Arthur, a greater abundance and a more luxurious arrangement prevailed.

After breakfast the children were sent into the garden, and Ivy was initiated into some of the duties she was expected to fulfil.



"This is where the children study," said Lady Clayre. "It is a sunny room, and I think it healthier they should not have a fire. After dinner, we generally take a walk, and there is always a fire in the drawing-room."

"And what do you wish me to do?" asked Ivy.

"When they come in, they will tell you what their studies are. They are not troublesome children."

She left the room at these words, and Ivy was left alone. There was a little dimness in her eyes, a little faintness in her heart, as she sat down by the table to collect her thoughts. She pressed her hands rather tightly together for about a minute, and then she said, half aloud, "I must be brave; this is exactly what I have so often said I could bear. Work—struggle—I *will* not be a coward."

But a girl's heart may be courageous and her spirit strong, but the flesh is weak. All the nameless delicacies and tendernesses which, summed up, form that sweetest of God's creations, girlhood, shrink at first from an encounter face to face with a lonely, barren, wearying fate. Encouragement, sympathy, love, are to a young girl more needful than daily bread. Ivy was for the first time with persons whom she felt nothing could make her like. Both



Sir Arthur and Lady Clayre were utterly heartless.

Ivy felt this, and felt, moreover, that it was the steadfast purpose of Lady Clayre to make her as much of a drudge as she could. She had, therefore, the disadvantage of being with family connections in a dependent capacity, and, at the same time, she was expected to earn her own maintenance. It was about the most unfortunate position to be in. With the same amount of labour among strangers she could have achieved entire independence; with the same obligation to work with the Ashleys, with her brother, with Cordelia, she would have been cherished and fostered and aided. Here there was a blank on every side.

But it must be endured. There was no escape.

"There are the children," she suddenly thought, "there may be something to interest and comfort me in them."

At this moment the children entered. The eldest, Ellen, was a miniature likeness of her mother. She was plain and sly-looking. The second, Annie, was still plainer, and much more sickly looking, but she was not like her mother. Her irregular features and heavy, projecting forehead were singularly unprepossessing. But though the expression was sullen, it was not false. The boy was the handsomest of the three; he



was more like his father, and there was more openness and unreserve about him.

Ivy was too young herself to care much for children in the abstract and by virtue of their childhood alone. There is in all womankind a more or less strong instinct of love of children, but it is latent in all in early youth. A young girl feels more shy with strange children than with her contemporaries or seniors.

The children remained grouped together at the door, and stared at her for a few seconds. At last the boy Frank called out—

“ I say, Ivy, am I to begin ; I always begin first.”

“ Very well,” she replied, “ and what do your sisters do meanwhile ? ”

“ We sew,” answered Ellen.

The boy brought his books, and the little girls sat down. Ivy observed that the elder one worked neatly and well, but that Anne sat with her work on her lap, evidently very idle or very cross.

When their turn came to read, Ellen gabbled through her task. Anne read with more difficulty, but with more attention.

At this moment Lady Clayre came in. She looked about, and then took up the children’s work.

“ Is this yours, Annie ? ”



“ Yes, mamma.”

“ Then you do not come to dessert to-day.”

Annie looked hard and sulky, but said nothing. She was dull and listless over her reading, and inveterately silent for the rest of the day.



CHAPTER II.

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FOR some weeks after Ivy's arrival at Clayre Court nothing could be more monotonous than her life. The death of Norton, which she heard of soon after her arrival, was felt from sympathy with her brother. Gerard's letter announcing it showed what a grief it was to him. He told Ivy he was going to India immediately. Excepting at meals, she never saw her grandfather, and as he was often absent for two or three days at a time, even this intercourse was very broken and uncertain. Her acquaintance with Lady Clayre never progressed beyond the commonplace, but somewhat antagonistic footing on which it had commenced. The children were an utter disappointment. Not troublesome, certainly. They obeyed, they learned their lessons, worked at their tasks (with the exception of Annie, who was often idle and sulky,) and were not stupid. But they were totally uninteresting. Ellen was a premature little miser, hoarding up her little possessions, and gloating over a little money-box in a way which



quite shocked Ivy. At first she remonstrated with her, and endeavoured to instil a more generous spirit; but Ellen not only resisted this, but reported Ivy's advice and suggestions to her mother, and Lady Clayre made this report the text of a long sermon she gave Ivy the next morning. She fervently entreated her *not* to teach her poor children to be extravagant, that having been entirely sacrificed to Sir Arthur's weak generosity towards his spendthrift family, their own economy was the only resource, poor things! they could look to. Ellen, she thought, had learnt what was right from her, and Ivy must not interfere in this matter. This lecture was interspersed with so many inuendoes as to Gerard, Aunt Anne, and Ivy herself, that tears of mortification rushed to Ivy's eyes. There was no truth in these assertions, but the falsehood was couched in such general terms, that it was hopeless to attack it.

When Lady Clayre left the room (she had entered the school-room to make the charge), Ivy leant back in her chair, and could not refrain from shedding a few tears. Angry, rebellious tears they were. "It is too bad," she murmured, half aloud.

Then came the reflection, as she called her good sense to her aid, that the very falsehood of the words ought to render them harmless.



"These are the stings which so many have to endure, and which I have often thought I could be so strong to bear. Thousands of governesses bear this every day of their lives, and when I have heard them complain, I have thought they were weak. How hard to make the internal triumph over the external!"

Poor Ivy! in a long life, how few of us solve that problem.

Ellen and Frank were out, Annie had been left at home on account of a cold, and Ivy had therefore an hour or two for herself. She always, on such occasions, went to her own room. There she always read and wrote, during the few minutes she was mistress of her own time. To-day, as she entered her little sanctum, a feeling of pleasure at possessing such a refuge soon banished the unpleasantness of her discussion with Lady Clayre.

"I was foolish," she thought, "not only to be vexed at what passed, but to have conversed with Ellen on this matter. If I wish to influence her, I must seek first to persuade her mother. If I could only find one vulnerable point in her!"

"To make straight distorted wills," was still the romance of Ivy's nature. How long it is before we find out how little we can do in that way, and less by direct effort than by accidental and indirect influences. It seems paradoxical to say, be good yourself, and do not strive so much after



the goodness of others, and you will succeed much better in making them so, but it is the fact. After a time she remembered Annie, and thought she must see what she was about. She went to the school-room, and saw Annie, curled up on a seat by the window, attentively reading and spelling, half aloud some words she could not make out. She was so absorbed, that she did not hear Ivy enter, but went on—

On Linden, when the sun was low,  
All bloodless lay th' untrodden snow ;" &c., &c.

"Are you fond of poetry?" said Ivy, putting her hand on her shoulder. Annie started as if she had been shot. She first turned scarlet, and then lead colour, and hid the book behind her back.

"What are you afraid of, Annie?"

"Don't!" said Annie.

"But why not speak; tell me. I love it too; and I know a great many pretty poems I could repeat to you."

A flash kindled in Annie's heavy eyes, but it was for a moment—"Let me go!" she said.

Ivy heard the other children return, and complied with the request, and the little incident would have been forgotten, had not Ivy dated from it a slight change in Annie's conduct towards her. It was a little less repelling.



One of the worst faults of Lady Clayre's management and education was the ugliness with which she surrounded her children. Their rooms were bare of every ornament, and the colours of the furniture were of the most sombre description, their dresses of the most dingy shade. They were never allowed anything pretty in the shape of toys—not, perhaps, systematically; but we shape our surroundings, and the history of our tastes, habits, and even dispositions is written in characters which all may read on our dresses, rooms, and belongings of every kind. There was no appreciation of beauty at Clayre Court. Ellen and Annie were never permitted to gather a flower of the myriads that were in the fields, hedges, or garden. It made their fingers dirty, or spoiled their gloves, or soiled their clothes. Ivy's love for flowers, the mud she would defy to select some peculiarly pretty blossom, were all part of a disposition of which Lady Clayre especially disapproved. She sneered, and called it cockneyish. Ivy wondered at this, and grieved at it, for the children's sake. During their walks she tried to point out the distinctive features of the landscape, and its beauties; she would show them the flowers she held in her hand; but it was like speaking of colours to the blind, or music to the deaf—they would not or could not understand. There was no piano in the house, and they did



not learn music. There seemed no fissure in which she could set the wedge. But, after she had discovered Annie absorbed in spelling out Campbell's poem she thought a chance remained. The children always ran out of the room after lessons, and their lessons were of the driest and most prosaic description. Endless catechisms and perpetual chronologies, skeletons of history and geography, in the shape of dates and names, to be committed to memory in the driest fashion. Lady Clayre would have nothing altered, and no new books purchased. Sometimes Ivy related some heroic fact which belonged to a particular date, but Ellen did not heed her, and Annie's head was always bent down over her book in a listless pose, which made it difficult to know whether she had heard or not.

But after the little incident of the ballad, Annie sometimes lingered for a minute in the school-room, and stared at Ivy as if she was going to ask her something, and then she would run out again before Ivy had time to speak.

One evening, as they returned from a walk, Ivy told the two little girls to stop while she went in to speak to a cottager whose child was ill. It was one of Lady Clayre's especial requests that her children should not enter the cottages of the poor. She would have tried to prevent Ivy's going there too, but she saw she must desist



from interference on this point. On this day, the reason that Ivy was accompanied by the children was, that after they had gone out, it had commenced raining, and going through the village being the shortest cut home, Ivy had taken it. As they had passed through, the rain had stopped, and Ivy as she passed the door of a cottage, stepped in for a moment, having told the children to wait for her. Ivy was only in the cottage a minute or two. Even to her inexperienced eyes, the child seemed sickening for some fever—its flushed face and heavy eyes bearing evident marks of impending serious illness. Ivy left some money with the mother, and promised to call later when she was alone. If she found then that it was an infectious complaint, she promised she would send some one to help the poor mother, who appeared to be within a few days of her confinement, and who had three other children to look after. Ivy bade the little girls run on, and followed more slowly. On entering the house, she went into her own room and changed her dress before she sat down with them, having thus managed that they should not touch her, or come into contact with her clothes from the moment she left the village.

As they sat at tea, Lady Clayre, who was usually present at that meal, informed them that they must not go near the village in their walks ; for



the doctor had called upon her, and had told her there had been cases of smallpox in the village.

"We have been in the village to-day," said Ellen, "and Ivy stopped at a poor woman's house whose children were ill."

"How often have I told you, Ivy, that I cannot bear the children going to the village! Surely there are walks enough in every direction. I think such disregard of my wishes most reprehensible."

The colour flew to Ivy's face, but she controlled herself.

"It was an accidental thing," she replied. "It began to rain heavily when we were half across the common, and I turned into the village, as being the shortest way home, and also that we might borrow umbrellas of Doctor Atkins, if the rain had continued."

"Extremely careless, I must say," murmured Lady Clayre, who would persist in believing what gave an excuse to her ill temper.

"Had I known there was any fear of infection, I would not have done it; but with the positive fact that we should get wet through, did we come through the park, I thought it the lesser evil to come through the village."

"How pale you are looking, Annie," remarked Lady Clayre, making no reply to Ivy.

"She was not well this morning, mamma. She said she had a headache."



"She had better go to bed, then," said Lady Clayre.

Annie rose, sulkily enough, and Ivy getting up at the same time, asked her mamma if she might take her to her own room?

"You do not think she has caught it; do you?"

"I do not know, but we had better be prudent. My room is so far from Frank's and Ellen's, that they would be safe at any rate. If she is quite well to-morrow, she can go down again."

"And you ——?"

"I can sleep on the sofa for to-night."

"It is the least she can do," muttered Lady Clayre, "to repair her inexcusable carelessness."

Ivy took Annie up to her room, and put her to bed herself. The little girl looked shy and sullen, but relaxed a little when she was placed in the bed, and Ivy drew round the curtains, and bending down, pressed the little hot hand which was outside the counterpane.

Annie smiled, and said, "Thank you, Ivy, you are very kind."

This was a great effort for her, and it gave a great pleasure to Ivy. They were the first words of real kindness she had heard, poor girl, since she had been at the Court.

She wrapped herself up in her cloak, and slept



on the sofa, bidding Annie call her if she wanted anything.

About midnight she was awake by the sound of sobs ; she rose and went to the bedside.

“ What is the matter, dear ? ”

“ Oh, Ivy, I feel so ill ! ”

Ivy lit her candle at the night-light, and saw at once what it was. Annie looked precisely as the baby in the cottager’s house did.

“ If that were smallpox, this must be the same.”

She tried to soothe Annie, till she fell asleep again, and then wrote a little note to Lady Clayre, which she resolved to place outside her door, and not let the servant in the next morning.

The note was to request the doctor to be sent for, and to tell her fears. If it were the smallpox, Ivy would nurse the child, and attend to her in every way.

It was the smallpox, and for several days Annie was very ill. She had naturally a weak constitution, and suffered much. Ivy was careful and tender in her nursing. Throughout the illness that gentle presence soothed the little girl more than she was aware of.

When she began to be convalescent, and was seated in the armchair, her eyes would follow Ivy, who was writing or reading. She seemed to be thinking and observing, but she spoke little,



though with less shyness than before her illness. One afternoon she was not so well as usual; and, after alternating from bed to armchair, and from armchair to bed, Ivy proposed taking her on her knee. She consented, and when established there, leant her head on Ivy's shoulder.

"This is so comfortable!" she said; "but you were writing, and now you cannot write."

"Never mind, Annie; I can do something else, which may perhaps make you forget all your pains—I will repeat some poetry."

Annie gave a start, and her face became scarlet. She nestled down closer and closer, and whispered, "Thank you, dear, good Ivy."

Ivy began; gradually Annie's head was raised, her eyes brightened and became larger, her fretful, sickly mouth parted in a smile. Never was any aspect so changed. She looked pleased, intelligent, almost pretty. Her eyes were fixed on Ivy's with that mystic enchantment which one would suppose must dilate the eyes of those serpents who are charmed by the snake-charmer's music. Some of the poetry was above her comprehension, yet whenever Ivy stopped, she cried out eagerly, "More;" and Ivy had to draw on the resources of her memory, which abounded in poems, but of course of a kind scarcely suited to Annie's comprehension; but the music of the rhyme, the vague pleasure which beautiful words



always give, and the intuitive perception which some organisations have of ideas, which their comprehension would seem incapable of grasping or expressing, made it a festival to Annie.

Ivy was repeating Shelley's "Arethusa," and as her voice rose and fell with the magic cadence, a moisture came into her own eyes as she caught the rapt look in Annie's. It seemed a pity to stop such pure, unfeigned pleasure; but she was afraid of exciting Annie too much, and when she had finished Shelley's lovely poem, she told her that was all. Annie sighed with a sigh which expressed the full contentment of her soul.

The next morning, when Annie awoke and found Ivy seated as usual by the bed waiting to give her her medicine, each felt there was a closer link between them than had ever existed before. There was a grateful accent in the child's voice when she spoke, and her countenance looked brighter than it had ever done.

The doctor pronounced her better, and allowed her to rise an hour earlier, and to sit up till her usual bedtime.

Ivy was busy writing letters, and having given Annie the "Lady of the Lake" to read, spoke little during the day; but when the dusk came, and it was too dark to see to read or write, she established herself in her armchair, and began asking Annie how it was she was so fond of



poetry, and how she had never said anything about it.

"I was afraid," she said simply, drawing a low stool, and sitting herself at Ivy's feet.

"Afraid?"

"I will tell you all about it, Ivy. When I was very little I was very ill, and the doctor said I must go away, and papa sent me to my nurse, who lives at Southampton. She was my wet-nurse, and is married to a sailor. I was so happy, for Martha is so kind; and lives in such a pretty, tiny house, with a garden by the sea. She always sings when she is at work very pretty songs, and she used to sing to me, and teach me the words. I liked to repeat them, though I never could sing them; but I liked the tune in the words almost as well as the tunes in the songs. I was so happy. When I was well I came back. One day I was repeating one of these songs, and they all laughed at me, and mamma said I must not repeat vulgar things I could not understand. I was afraid after that. I did not like to have them called so, so I never said anything about it; but I like nothing else, and it is so dull and stupid downstairs."

"And now ——?"

"I shall never be unhappy again. Will you promise me, Ivy, to let me come here sometimes, and, if I am very good, will you repeat to me



what you said last night?" And Annie's eyes dilated with a look of dreamy delight as she seemed to hear again of the "earth's white daughter."

Ivy kissed her, and gave her the required promise. To her it was as great a boon as to the child to find one seed of sympathetic intercourse in this dreary home. She could understand the pressure which such an abode would exercise on a timid, sickly child. Too languid to contest with those older than herself, and the repression on one point acting as a barrier on all, the child had grown more and more sullen and indolent. But the window was open, the fresh air was admitted, the blue sky was seen, and the little captive soul could expand and enjoy.

Through this susceptibility to one great chord of beauty the whole wondrous harmony might be admitted.

Annie continued very delicate, however, so delicate, that the doctor prescribed change of air. Lady Clayre could not or would not consent. The expense was an insurmountable obstacle, for Annie was too old to be sent this time to Martha. Sir Arthur wished all the children to go, but Lady Clayre would not hear of it. At this time there arrived a very pressing invitation to Ivy from Miss Ashley to spend a little while at the Ferry. Ivy wrote to her to decline it, and mentioned, as one



reason, the illness of Annie. To her surprise, an answer was returned from Miss Ashley pressing the invitation, and including Annie in it. She and her father were going to town for advice on account of his health, and her mother would be left alone, and was very anxious to see Ivy.

It seemed so desirable a change, that Ivy felt it would be cruel to deprive her little charge of it. She proposed it to Lady Clayre, or rather she mentioned it first to Sir Arthur.

"Very good, indeed," he answered; "those people are very civil, good sort of people; they have never taken advantage of the connection in any way, and Annie is too young to learn vulgar habits from them."

This was his way of expressing himself.

"The journey is an expensive one," said Lady Clayre, with pinched lips.

"Pooh! pooh! Here, Ivy, a change will do you both good; this will pay for your journey there and back, and Annie's too." He gave her a ten-pound note. Lady Clayre turned green, but the note was in Ivy's hand, and there was nothing for it but resignation.



CHAPTER III.

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IT was a bright April noon when Ivy and Anne arrived at the Ferry. In two months it would be two years since Ivy had arrived there first.

"My dear Ivy," said Mrs. Ashley, when she met Ivy at the door, "how glad I am to welcome you once more."

Mrs. Ashley looked as gentle as ever, but paler than she used to do. Her gentleness was most soothing to poor Ivy, whose bright, fresh face had almost learned to wear a look of care in all her late experiences. The down of the plum is not more evanescent than that first look of careless innocence on a girl's face. The expression of some of the best qualities of womanhood replace it, but that first buoyant sweetness is gone. It is scarcely a paradox to say that those faces which wear it most genuinely are the faces which lose it earliest.

Between Mrs. Ashley and Ivy, in that first evening, when they sat alone, was a silence. Both thought of Cordelia, yet both avoided naming her. Mrs. Ashley from her usual re-



serve, Ivy from a newly-learnt caution. Mrs. Ashley was communicative enough, however, about other subjects. She spoke much of Sarah, and of the improvement the last year had made in her temper.

"You would not know Sarah, Ivy; she is unlike anything she ever used to be. She does not look well. She is thin and pale, but she is so quiet, and speaks with so much more gentleness than she did. She is everything to us." Mrs. Ashley sighed.

"When do they return?" asked Ivy.

"Very soon. Mr. Ashley has been so ailing, that Mr. Frampton recommended him taking some other advice and going to London."

"Is Mr. Frampton still here?"

"Yes, he is still here, and unmarried. He was to have been married; but just before the marriage he suffered great losses, and the lady drew back, and behaved very ill, I believe. He has felt it much, and does not go out at all, except professionally."

To Ivy's astonishment, when she went to bed, she found that the servant deputed to wait on her was the Susie she had befriended in town."

The girl was all blushing gratitude, and told Ivy how comfortable and happy she was.

"And Carlo?"

Susie turned a little pale. "I never mentions



he, miss. I do not know whether missus—I means Miss Ashley—would like it.”

“Why not, Susie?”

“Followers, ma’am,” said Susie, succinctly.

“But have you heard?”

“Sometimes I does.”

“Is he well?”

“Yes, ma’am, I did hear—but not for a long time—he left his service to go to the wars.”

“Wars!”

“Yes, he’s fighting for his country, ma’am.”

“Ah! I understand.

“I did not tell, please, missus, because they hates furriners here.”

Ivy smiled at the servants knowing their master’s opinions.

As Ivy lay down in her little bed she thought of the absorbing interest in one whom she was never likely to see again, with which she used to remain awake in that bed two short years ago. Surely her mother must have heard something of Cordelia, but how was she to ask?

The next few mornings were occupied with Annie. Ivy showed her all her favourite walks, and took her down to the seashore.

Annie enjoyed it all intensely, but in a grave, silent manner, which was peculiar to her. She had never been so happy, but she was more still than ever. Some persons would have been almost



vexed at this expressionless pleasure, but Ivy knew her now, and understood it. Annie was active and demonstrative in nothing. If she ever did find her way to expression, it would not be by gestures or laughter, but by words and looks. She knew what the child felt, for she had measured herself what the change must be. Besides all the delights of entire indulgence, fresh air, pretty sights in and out of the house, there was the liberty of sitting on a stool and reading poetry to her heart's content. The last boon was the one Annie appreciated the most. Without it the others would have been almost unprized; with it they all blended into a phantasmagoria of enchantment.

To Annie a book was food, fire, raiment, I was about to say, lodging. Ivy would observe her go into the garden with a book and stop unconsciously near some bush which impeded her progress, and stand absorbed for hours on the same spot. If the book came to an end, or if the darkness suddenly roused her, she would shut it and look round her as if she were brought back from some other world, but otherwise nothing moved her. The wind might blow, the sun might shine, people be talking all around her, or she might be left alone, it was all immaterial.

If not forcibly taken possession of, and carried



into tea or dinner, no sense of hunger seemed to be strong enough to disturb her. I must say that the merits of the book were not always in proportion to this attention; but there was a magic in the printed page, in living in a world entirely external from herself, which was of itself irresistible. Ivy interfered very little with her. She was assured that some natures, if freely left to feel out their own direction, will reach it with a certainty, which all outward guiding and thwarting will only impede. Except during the brief time when she was with her "vulgar" nurse, Annie had been systematically mismanaged, and the chances were, would have been irretrievably spoiled but for the beneficent apparition of Ivy. Her mother did not understand children, and Annie was a difficult child to understand even by those most accustomed to them. But now Ivy held the clue, and she was resolved the poor little girl should have every advantage it was in her power to bestow on her.

Mrs. Ashley's indulgent sweetness left Ivy at liberty to do exactly as she wished with her charge. She herself was gentle with children, but was somewhat shy with them.

Ivy observed that when the letters came, an eager look would come into Mrs. Ashley's placid face, which would fall into a disappointed and pained one as she closed them; but still she was



silent. Once, when Ivy received a few hasty lines from Gerard, she looked up, and the colour flew into her face, as Ivy made an exclamation.

"What is the matter, Ivy? I beseech you tell me."

"Nothing," said Ivy, "only Gerard exposes himself to such risks. He left Italy after poor Norton's death, when he was not quite recovered from his own illness, and arrived in India quite knocked up. He has been ill at Bombay."

There was a silence for a few minutes. Ivy yearned after her brother. She longed to go to him—to be of some comfort now that he evidently wanted comfort. He had not told her of his interview with Cordelia. She had asked him how it was they had not met, but he had left her question unanswered. He seemed more depressed than he had been even when he first arrived in Welbeck Street. At Clayre Court she was so unloved, she could be of so little use; with him all would be so different. It is so natural to think that anywhere but where we are is the fitting sphere for us; so hard to say, "Let me first make the best of the inevitable. I am here—let me work out the reasons why I should be *here* instead of *there*!"

A more imaginative, impatient temper would have found it still harder; but Ivy was possessed of more sympathetic qualities than imaginative



ones. She sympathised, and understood from sympathy with others ; but, in her own destiny, and in regard to the future, her fancy was less illusory than that of many girls of her age would be. Yet for some moments Ivy remained lost in a sad reverie. At last she roused herself :—

“Have you better news of Mr. Ashley ?”

“Sarah writes that the physician says little. He recommends immediate return to his home. In an illness like his, though the mind requires amusement, it also depends upon quiet and the regularities of home life. They speak of returning to-night or to-morrow.”

Again Mrs. Ashley sighed, as if frustrated in some hope. Here Ivy’s quick sense came to her aid. She observed that Mrs. Ashley looked at the letter she held from Gerard, and it flashed through her she might wish to know if he named Cordelia.

“I am going to Annie,” she said, rising. “I promised her I would take her to the shore with me. Would you like to read my letter from Gerard, Mrs. Ashley ?” She rose, placed the letter before Mrs. Ashley, and stepped out of the window on to the lawn.

Mrs. Ashley took up the letter and read it through. It was the first letter of his she had ever seen. The utter despondency of it touched her woman’s heart. The expressions of affection



for Ivy, though so brief, were so warm, that Mrs. Ashley vainly sought to image the writer of the letter as the hard, haughty young man her husband represented him. But of Cordelia there was no trace. Gerard wrote as a single man, whose only tie in the world was his sister. "Oh, had they never met!" was Mrs. Ashley's exclamation. Hitherto she had only thought of her own child, and had always said, "Oh, if Cordelia had never seen him!" But now she saw that the bolt which had cleft asunder both trees, had left as indelible traces of its havoc on the strong oak as on the frailer elm at its side. Gerard's whole letter bore the signs of a broken-hearted man.

A few evenings afterwards Mr. Ashley and Sarah returned. Mr. Ashley was pleased to see Ivy; but even in the expression of this pleasure Ivy could see the change which illness had made in him. He was so different from the self-controlled, somewhat rough and imperious man she had known.

She sat with him while Sarah and Mrs. Ashley went out together, after Sarah had greeted Ivy.

He asked if she had heard from her brother.

"Yes; I had a letter a few days ago."

"He will be now the heir of Clayre Court?"

"Yes."

"Did Mr. Norton Clayre leave him any money?"



"No—certainly not." Ivy was surprised at the question.

There was a dead silence. Mr. Ashley's face had lost its sunburnt, ruddy hue, and he changed colour now like a woman. Ivy could see that he stooped, and that the hands which were holding the newspaper—which, with the mechanical habit of an Englishman, he had taken out of his pocket and unfolded—trembled as he spoke.

Ivy looked wistfully at him. She had always felt more inclined to be confidential with him than with any other member of his family. She longed to whisper a question to him, but feared to agitate him. With an effort she controlled herself, drew a stool beside him, sat down, and began telling him how glad she was to find herself at the Ferry again.

Mr. Ashley listened to her with interest.

"But you are altered, my dear. You look paler and older than you did."

"Perhaps it is the black dress."

"No; your forehead seems changed. You have suffered, my child."

"I have been obliged to exert myself since Aunt Anne died. But I think it will do me good. I only wish I could feel I was of use myself."

"So you are, I am positive. Everyone must acknowledge it. But I do not understand why,



there being only two of you, you are not with your brother."

"Aunt Anne did not wish it."

"Perhaps it is as well, as he is in India; yet his seems to me your natural home. A woman should keep in her natural home, and with her nearest ties, Ivy."

"But women cannot always choose. They must sometimes try to earn money."

"If a woman knows how to save money, she can leave the earning of it to others. A woman is too proud to help her mother to sew, or cook, or sweep; but does not mind going into a stranger's house to teach some half-dozen little monkeys, and be treated like a dog for her pains. She calls that being independent. I never had any patience with such humbug."

Mr. Ashley's face flushed.

"Dear Mr. Ashley," interrupted Ivy's mild voice, "I agree with you partly, but all are not so fortunate as to be able to be of use in their own homes, and strangers are perhaps just as likely to be kind as one's own relatives."

"You are right, Ivy. I am a passionate old fool; but there are subjects which irritate me more than they used to do, and I sometimes think I am scarcely sane on some points; but I have been sorely tried—yes, sorely tried."



He repeated the words in a gloomy, hopeless sort of way ; and again there was silence.

When Mrs. Ashley and Sarah came down, Ivy remarked they had both the traces of tears on their faces, and as the lamp was brought in, she could see the change Mrs. Ashley spoke of in Sarah.

Sarah's square, fat person had shrunk away into the shadow of its former comely, though somewhat vulgar, proportions. The high colour was gone. It was quite a plain, pale, middle-aged woman, who sat at the table busying herself with the tea-things. She was dressed without any attempt at taste, but in a quieter style than formerly. Her movements were subdued, and though her voice was still harsh, it was not abrupt or provoking. Ivy was struck by her silence. She attended to the wants of her parents, and of Ivy and Annie, but she scarcely spoke, and seemed lost in thought. Cordelia's absence weighed on them all. It seemed to Ivy, that had she been lost by death, it would have been less oppressive to think of her than thus. Then they would have spoken of her with all the cherished remembrances which belonged to her ; now the sense of the void was fraught with such bitter pain, that every one shrunk from alluding to it, and yet on all sides there was a morbid tendency to touch the forbidden theme. It was evident, however, that no one knew where Cordelia was,



what her occupations were, and that a strong anxiety was felt on the subject.

At night, after Ivy had retired to her room, and, though undressed, was still sitting up with a book in her hand, seated near the window, she heard a gentle tap at the door.

She rose to open it, and there she found Miss Ashley.

"Can I come in for a minute," she said, almost timidly.

"Certainly." And Ivy drew back to let her pass.

Miss Ashley came in, put her light down on the table, and sat down at some distance from Ivy.

"Miss Clayre, can you tell us anything of Cordelia,—of my sister?"

"Nothing lately. I was anxious to know if you had heard of anything; for since the day I left you I have only heard——"

"Heard!"

"Not from her, that she was well; and I know that she was in Florence last winter. Have you heard nothing, then?"

"My mother had one letter six months after she left us. Cordelia said she was well, and that no one need be anxious about her."

"And then——"

"Nothing since. About a month after your



cousin's death, my father received a note from his banker, saying that three thousand pounds had been paid into his account from a house in London."

"Three thousand pounds!"

"Yes; that is all. It purported to be from Mr. Clayre, but he found out it was not from him."

"How could she?" exclaimed Ivy, whose thoughts reverted to Cordelia.

"Exactly—I felt it was Cordelia. We went up to town, we searched high and low, we made inquiries of the correspondents of the house of business, but nothing could be discovered. The money had been paid from a house in Paris, and the house in Paris had received it from Milan."

"But if from Cordelia, it must put your mind at rest as to her well-being."

"Ivy, it is I who have been the cause of all. I was always jealous of her. I reproached her, I drove her from the house, and it was to satisfy my shameful jealousy that she did this; but how is it possible, with even her great gifts, she could have acquired such a sum? Oh, Cordelia! Cordelia!" Miss Ashley wrung her hands.

"But what do you fear," said Ivy innocently.

Miss Ashley looked up at Ivy. The guileless look which met hers was more consolatory than hours of spoken consolation. To Ivy—and Ivy was intelligent—there was no possibility of fear.



## CHAPTER IV.

IVY'S presence was evidently a great comfort to Mr. Ashley. Her unaffected and cheerful good humour, the healthy freshness which seemed to surround her as with an atmosphere, and which was felt by all within her sphere, was like an aromatic breeze to the nerves of the invalid. His wife and daughter wore the same mourning in their thoughts as he did, and in their society his sadness increased.

Shut up in all their hearts was the one gnawing fear, what had become of Cordelia? how had she become possessed of this large sum of money?

Ivy loved Cordelia as truly as they did, was anxious and grieved about her; but no fears of any appalling nature entered her head. She knew that Cordelia had gone on the stage, and Ivy felt convinced that she would command success. But she did not venture to utter this; in both families, the Ashleys and the Clayres, the word stage seemed synonymous with perdition.

Annie had taken a fancy to Miss Ashley,



and while Ivy was occupied walking or driving with her father, Sarah took care of the little girl.

The sorrowful, repentant woman was attracted to the serious, silent child more than she would have been by some more blooming specimen of infancy.

Everything about country life had a charm for Annie. She went about the gardens and the cottages, shy, quiet, but enjoying everything. Her love for animals was the most demonstrative feeling she possessed. The dogs had learned to know her, and came out to her as she passed their different domiciles.

One dog was a great favourite—a black and tan setter, who knew perfectly well the hour of their daily walks, and he would meet them and accompany them.

On their return Annie always took from her pocket a piece of biscuit or sugar, which she had brought for him, and with a pat of farewell, would dismiss her faithful attendant.

One day, as the two were walking down the village, Mr. Frampton met them.

“Have you seen my dog? oh, here he is. You rascal. You deserve to be thrashed for making me lose my time searching for you.”

“Pray, sir,” said Annie with eager looks, “do not;” and she would have cried, but she saw her



words had taken effect ; for Mr. Frampton only shook his stick at the dog.

" I am afraid it is our fault—we have encouraged him," said Sarah.

" That is where he disappears to, then, regularly every day ; I could not make it out." The dog saw the anger was passed, and began fondling his master, which considerably modified Annie's first impression of him.

" Who is this little girl ?" he asked.

" A relation of Ivy's."

" Miss Clayre, that fine girl who sprained her ankle about two years ago ?"

" Yes ; she is staying with us again, and brought this little girl with her."

Mr. Frampton was silent, his thoughts had returned to that time when attendance on his patient had been the excuse for so many tender passages and so much intercourse with the woman at his side. She thought of it too ; but she had suffered so much since, that the remembrance came and went like a passing shadow.

" Do you think Mr. Ashley has derived benefit from his trip to London ?"

" He has been better since his return ; but I think Ivy has done him more good than anything. He is very fond of her, and she is so lively and animated, yet sensible, that he enjoys her society, and becomes less desponding himself."



"I suppose your mother and you are too anxious about him?"

"We are naturally more serious from having watched him through his illness. Ivy is not connected as we are with all that dreary time."

"You must take care of yourself, Miss Ashley. You do not seem strong. You are very much changed." Mr. Frampton looked kindly at her.

"I hope I am," said Miss Ashley gently; but she said no more. It was a great proof of how radical was the change in her that she never spoke of herself in any way either in self depreciation or in indirect eulogium, as she had been accustomed to.

Annie had moved on with the dog, and Mr. Frampton followed by Sarah's side, as if his mind was full of something he could not express. The vulgar, loquacious man was tamed by some feeling he would have found it difficult to describe.

"I should like to speak to you, Miss Ashley."

"What is it, Mr. Frampton; can we do anything——"

"You will listen to me?"

"Certainly."

"I should like to make a confession. Do not answer me yet. About a twelvemonth ago it was my wish to marry. I was in a position that allowed me to do so, and I had seen a lady who I thought was calculated to make me happy. I am



not going to defend myself, for I believe candidly I acted ill, and certainly, if so, I was well punished. Though I had these feelings for this lady, the advice of friends, and some ambition of my own, led me in the hope of rising still more in my profession, and of commanding larger resources, to check my own inclinations, and to propose to another lady who had great wealth. I acted like a rascal; but I had the comfort of knowing that I only hurt myself; that the lady in question, the person I loved, was quite unconscious of my feelings, and certainly by no means reciprocated them. [Oh, Mr. Frampton, where did you learn to fib with such refined art?] I proposed to the heiress, was accepted, then came the failure of the bank in which all my money was invested; the ruin of all but my professional income, which is dependent of course on daily vicissitudes, and the subsequent breaking off of my marriage. The last I did not regret!"

"Well?"

"I have gone through the experience which a sudden change of fortune entails. I have met coolness where once I had been courted assiduously. I have felt that the diminution of my purse has given an impression that my medical knowledge has also suffered, and this has made me wiser. I feel more independent of a popularity, in acquiring which, I find, I personally had so little



to do, and intend to seek my own happiness without any regard to anything else. There is one family who have never made any difference in their manner to me from first to last—who have always been kind and friendly throughout, perhaps rather more since my reverses than formerly. There is one lady, and she is the only single lady in Brookferry, who has seemed unconscious of my change of fortune and entirely regardless of it. It is very pleasant to me to think that this family is yours, and that you, whom I have so long admired, have proved yourself the estimable, kind woman I have ever thought you."

Poor Mr. Frampton; he could not divest himself of his conceit. He knew of no other reward for what he considered exalted virtue but an offer of himself.

Sarah was silent.

"Dear Miss Ashley, will you allow me to hope that you are not averse to me; that, though I am a poor man, you will not reject me. I know we shall not be a rich couple; but I hope that with hard work and perseverance these clouds will blow over, and that you will have no reason to repent your consent if you are so good as to give it."

"Excuse me, Mr. Frampton," said Sarah. "I am so surprised—I ought not to have allowed you to go on."

"Why?"



Sarah was crying bitterly, but with an effort she recovered herself.

"I ought to have told you that even—even—I mean that I ought to have confessed to you that I have been the cause of a great, great sorrow to my father and mother; such a bitter grief, and one which may be so much greater than we think, that I have but one duty left, which is to help them to bear it. I can never leave them. I am of little comfort, I fear," she sobbed; "but such as it is I must give it them. They have no one but me."

"But your sister, Mrs. Clayre?"

Sarah's lips turned white as she replied, "We know nothing of her since she left the Ferry. It was my fault that she left it."

"But I should not be taking you from your parents—I live so near."

"Do not ask it," she said.

"But will you tell me one thing? if this were not so, might I be allowed to hope?"

There was a pause. How cruelly are our wishes gratified sometimes. For some of us the flowers of our destiny come into bloom in the night alone.

All Sarah's thoughts had been so wrenched from herself of late that she could scarcely replace herself in the state when those words would have been so welcome, and yet they touched her to the heart. Though it was all over now, it was



sweet to think she had been loved. She did not remember how poor that love had been which had been sacrificed to interest with such ease. All she thought of was the love which *had* existed, and which was still in being. Even a vulgar, ordinary-minded woman, if she has the power of loving, is as capable of refinement and delicacy in her love as the most exalted heroine. Sarah Ashley felt that poor Mr. Frampton had received many mortifications since his loss of fortune, and that, therefore, it was incumbent on her to be more frank than she would otherwise have been.

"You do not answer me, Miss Ashley," said Mr. Frampton gently. "If things were different in your family, might I hope?"

"Yes," answered Sarah in a low voice, and she held out her hand to him with a look which said more than her words.

He pressed her hand; and even Mr. Frampton was silent, for he saw in the fading away of the colour on her cheek, that the effort she had made was a great one.

"But have you no clue to your sister's place of abode?"

"None; we know she went abroad—that is all."

"She had no means?"

"None. She had a few pounds in her purse, that was all."



"And Miss Clayre knows nothing?"

"Nothing; her brother went abroad to see his cousin, who is now dead; but Ivy says, though she has put the question directly to him, he has never taken any notice of it whatever. Besides, I know Cordelia would avoid him as much as possible, and take means never to cross his path."

"Are their differences so great?"

"I believe he has wronged her grievously. It is a sad, miserable affair; yet as long as she was with us we might hope that the sorrow was not irrevocable—a reconciliation between them might have taken place. Ivy and Cordelia were so attached to each other; but now it is all different—and for this I am responsible." Sarah wept again convulsively. "But, excuse me," she said, trying to check herself, "I am acting without any self-control; but you see, you understand, how impossible it is for me to think of anything but Cordelia and my parents?"

Mr. Frampton wrung her hand. They had now reached the entrance of the lane which led to the Ferry from the village.

"I will not be troublesome; but if I can be of any use to you about this, will you let me know? Do not shake your head. I will not intrude upon you; but you might require some aid—if you needed sending any one to London—will you allow me to hope I may be of service to you?"



It is an old tale and often told. The accessories are ever varying; but the subject itself is the same. There is a moment in every man's life when he is chivalrous and heroic—a fleeting moment when the most ordinary woman may flatter herself she is a queen.

Miss Ashley walked on happier at heart than she had been for months—I might say, in one way, for years.

Mr. Frampton was not less vulgar or conceited than before; but his best feelings had been roused. There are splendid exceptions, I know; but the groundwork of character in most of us differs less than one imagines. The difference between human beings lies chiefly in one fact. With some of us the good is easily reached, and is a warm spring continually bubbling up to the surface; with others it has sunk down under many layers of worldliness, and requires the blow of some strong feeling, to reveal it is there. Those who love us are those clear-seeing ones who detect the potentialities of our nature beneath the rocky surface. This explains some of the apparently causeless predilections, one constantly sees.

Sarah Ashley and John Frampton were very ordinary persons; but they both acted this good part towards each other.

As Ivy sat on the terrace she could see Miss Ashley and Annie walking home. She observed



them. Miss Ashley's veil was down; but her walk was quicker, more elastic than it had been lately. She stopped for a moment and picked a flower from the hedge. Something had evidently cheered her. Annie came on as usual with her desultory, abstracted step. She had a tall bulrush in her hand, and was contemplating it earnestly. It looked like a fairy wand in the child's hand. To a certain degree it was a fairy wand. Annie's mind was full of fairy legends and fairy poetry as she held it.

The child with the bulrush and the woman with her love-thoughts, both held a sceptre which gave them empire over the dull present, and made them sovereigns in the fairy realms of poetry and love.

That evening, after Annie had gone to bed, the conversation fell on the subject of Ivy's departure. Mr. Ashley would not hear of it. "No," he said, "little Annie is well certainly; but your stay at the Ferry must depend on my recovery. I cannot spare you yet." When Ivy expostulated, he said, "She might send back Annie if she pleased; but she must prolong her visit." Annie looked so piteous the next morning at the bare mention of such a proposal that Mr. Ashley was betrayed into the first laugh he had indulged in since Cordelia's departure.

"It is very odd," he said, "how two of you



seem to have taken to us. One would not think that child was in a stranger's house, and that the return which she so dreads is to her own mother."

Mr. Frampton did not come oftener than formerly to the Ferry ; but when he did come there was an indescribable change in his and Sarah's manner to each other. She was so timidly retiring, he was so attentive, yet unobtrusive, that at first Mrs. Ashley looked up surprised ; but with a mother's intuition she soon guessed what had taken place. When she bid Sarah good night, after the truth had flashed upon her, Sarah felt there was unusual tenderness in the kiss her mother gave her. Her own eyes filled with tears.



CHAPTER V.

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THE next morning it was decided that Ivy should write to Lady Clayre and request permission to prolong her visit. She informed her that Annie's health was entirely recovered and that she did not waste her time, as her lessons had recommenced.

Ivy wondered that she received no reply to this letter, but imagined that her grandfather might be absent, and that his wife waited till his return. The days passed, and there was a kind of expectancy in all. Mr. Ashley and Ivy walked and drove together as usual, and Ivy sought to speak of Cordelia and to prepare the father's mind for the probability that the stage had been her resource.

"My dear Ivy, do not speak of such a possibility," he paused, and then continued vehemently, "Ivy, you do not know what I have suffered, what I still suffer. I am getting to be an old man, and I tell you I would gladly suffer so for years if, at the end, I could believe I had been mistaken, and that Cordelia was not that thing—an actress. I could curse her when I think of it."



Ivy wrung her hands.

"I am sorry to vex you, my dear, I will not speak of it again; but it is killing me."

While they were talking Miss Ashley had approached and had heard what they had said.

"Father," she said, as she joined them, "I will say nothing as to the right or wrong of being an actress; but the person who deserves your curse is the one who drove Cordelia to do what she has done."

"Who—who?"

"I did!"

"You, Sarah?"

"I was jealous of your love for her; I was miserable—wicked. I spoke to her one night in such a way that I made her as desperate as myself. I reproached her with the money you had taken from me to pay her husband's debts—and——"

"I see it all," said Mr. Ashley in a choked voice.

Ivy left his side and went and stood next Miss Ashley and drew her arm in hers. It was necessary. Sarah Ashley looked calm; but she was trembling from head to foot.

Mr. Ashley's face was as white as ashes; he looked hard at his daughter, and seemed about to say something violent; but he remained silent, and then he turned away, murmuring "God help her—poor Cordelia!"



When they reached the house, Mr. Ashley went into his own room at once. Ivy followed Miss Ashley into hers. The effort she had made manifested itself in the burst of tears which overcame her as she threw herself on a chair.

Ivy tried to console her. She understood what Miss Ashley must feel in hearing her father's denunciations, with the consciousness that her unbridled temper had been the cause of driving her sister to the act he so condemned. She felt that this repentance was a salutary grief, and one she would not if she could have sponged out; but she tried to point out to her that to consider Cordelia irretrievably lost, because she had sought independence in the exercise of her great gifts, was unjust and wrong. Miss Ashley had not thought much of these things; she had accepted her father's dictum, and the sharp goad of necessity had never driven her to reflect for herself. But even had she done so, Miss Ashley had far less independence of mind or strength of character than her sister. The tender, fragile-looking Cordelia could stand alone—she had a loving nature and a warm heart, but she was self-reliant, Sarah was self-willed; and Sarah's very jealousy of the love shown to her sister arose from a dependent spirit, which needed support and encouragement. Beneath that envious and carping rudeness had been a galling sense of inferiority.



We perpetually confound temper with character, and think a high temper invariably accompanies a strong will; it is just as often accompanied by a very weak one.

Miss Ashley listened to Ivy, and felt the kindness of all she said; but she shuddered when she pictured to herself Cordelia's life, and then the bitter self-reproaches would rise again.

"At all events," said Ivy, "it was very good and brave of you to confess all to your father."

"But did you see what a blow it was to him?"

"At first it would be so but it is best that he should know it. The worst is over; whatever happens now must be better. Your mother has so much influence over him that she will soften him; they have both seen how you have suffered, and deeply as they have mourned over Cordelia's absence, your grief has been bitterer than theirs. I have a deep feeling we shall all be happy yet—nothing ever does go on in a miserable way indefinitely. There is sure to be a change of some sort. I wish I could make you all look upon it with my eyes; but if I cannot do that, I must persuade you that light will ultimately come out of this darkness."

Ivy kissed Miss Ashley with an affectionateness which was very sweet to the aching heart of the poor woman. She remembered how she had grudged her sister this young girl's love, and she



could now know what a consolation it was. All these recollections made the tears flow faster; but they were quieter and gentler, and Ivy left her, thinking that she would be best alone now that some turn was given to her thoughts.

She herself went into the drawing-room. It was empty.

Mrs. Ashley was with her husband, and Annie was playing in the garden.

Ivy fell into a reverie. She thought of all the sufferings which indirectly her family connection with this family had caused; Cordelia's marriage, and all the sorrow it had produced at the time, and then the consequences. And yet how entirely was all this sorrow the effect of the prejudices, the errors, the self-will of the parties concerned. How rarely is it that we can impute our griefs "to the visitation of God." How extraordinarily we mortals seem bent on our own sorrow. Human hearts writhe, and shrink, and agonize under some great torture, and too often it is entirely self-incurred, and as indubitably would cease if we applied ourselves with single-heartedness to the task of probing it. Cordelia and her husband, Mr. Ashley and Sarah, were all martyrs to their own distorted wills.

While Ivy was thinking of these things in absorbed and serious thought, she had not heard a slight commotion in the house. Presently the



door opened, and Mrs. Ashley, looking flushed and flurried, entered. She held a paper in her hand.

"What is the matter?" said Ivy, starting up with that intuition we all have that something has happened in which we have immediate concern.

"Where is Annie?" asked Mrs. Ashley in an agitated voice.

"In the garden—but tell me what is it?"

"Your grandfather," began Mrs. Ashley; but Ivy had taken the paper out of her hand. It was a telegraphic despatch.

Frank Clayre was dead: had fallen from a gate and been killed on the spot. Annie and Ivy had better stay, if they could do so, for the present at the Ferry.

Annie shed some natural tears for her little brother; but too little affection between her children had been fostered by Lady Clayre for the grief to be very violent or lasting.

In the next letter Sir Arthur wrote that he was going to London on business, and that he had sent Lady Clayre and Ellen to the seaside for change of air. The letter was very brief; but there was this mysterious addition:—"I have sent for Gerard on business that nearly concerns him. Has Mr. Ashley ever heard of or from his daughter, Mrs. Gerard Clayre? If not, do not mention to him that I have asked. I shall have



occasion, probably, to write to him before long, and I can then explain myself."

Ivy was, of course, quite silent; but this paragraph tortured her for many days. Why should Gerard return? He had only joined his regiment a few months. It was unintelligible. Ivy did not understand the value which Sir Arthur placed on Gerard's life now. While Frankie lived his grandson might live or die, and he was indifferent to it, for Frankie would succeed to the heirship, but now there was no other heir in the direct line to Clayre Court.

As to Cordelia, M. Corsand's absence prevented all information about Cordelia reaching Ivy. Even the slight clue which might have been obtained through Carlo was broken. Since he had left her service and joined the army, Carlo had not written.

Poor Susie's eyes were getting red from many nights of crying and anxiety; and what added to it was, that she had been written to by the matron of the workhouse in which her mother was that she was sinking fast, and if she wished to see her again she had better come.

Miss Ashley kindly gave her permission to go.

The morning Susan was to go, Mr. Frampton called to see Mr. Ashley, and to receive his commands, for he, too, was going to town.



Miss Ashley mentioned the fact of Susan's going to see her sick mother.

"Poor girl, I will look after her a little on the way; and if I have a moment's time I will go and see her mother."

"Thank you; how long shall you be away?"

"About a month, or perhaps less. Can I do anything for you?"

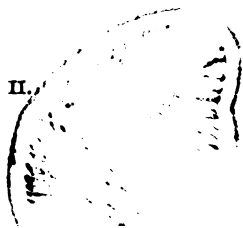
"Nothing," said Sarah sadly. "I am hopeless that any inquiries can avail now."

"About your sister? Rely on me to keep my ears and eyes open. When one least expects it, sometimes one finds that which one has been long waiting for in vain."

Mr. Frampton's trite philosophy was not much attended to, and yet its worth was attested more entirely and earlier than his dejected listener dreamed.

Alas! what a shock to every one at the Ferry was however to precede this.

About three weeks after the news of Frankie's death, Sir Arthur wrote to Mr. Ashley. Mr. Ashley was alone when he received the letter. When his wife entered the room after two or three hours, she found her husband stretched speechless on the ground.





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the same time, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) published a letter to the editor from a physician in the same hospital, who stated that the patient had been treated for a long time and that the physician was not sure if the patient was still alive.

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